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To Our Readers

We wish to remind readers who submit mss. to the *Review* that our summer moratorium on unsolicited mss. runs from June 1 to September 30.

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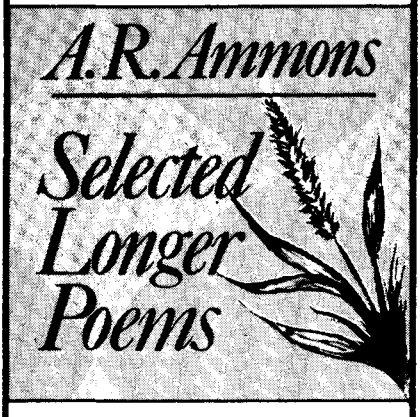

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Letter from London

DEAR H,

I think you would have found it an interesting winter here in London. You'd have seen your liberal-minded friends in quite a busy mental state, taking down some of their old beliefs from a top shelf, dusting them, and wondering whether they wanted to keep them any longer.

The affair that really got everyone going in this way was the unmasking of the "Fourth Man." As you'll know, Sir Anthony Blunt, a distinguished art historian who had been the Keeper of the Queen's Pictures (and had supervised the wonderful restoration of the Mantegna frescoes at Hampton Court Palace, which you should come and see) was revealed to have been a Soviet agent, and the man who tipped off Burgess and Maclean so they could get away to Moscow in 1951. He'd gone free, because in 1964 he'd confessed everything, in return for a promise of immunity and secrecy.

These revelations, as it happened, had been preceded by a nationwide spell of addiction to a spy serial on television: John le Carré's *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy,* in which Alec Guinness had played the part of Smiley, unmasker of the "mole" at the top of the British Secret Service. ("Mole" became an addition to the British vocabulary; a critic described Norma, the Druid priestess in Bellini's opera who has secretly had some children by the enemy Roman commander, as "a superlatively successful mole.") And no doubt some newspaper readers felt, as the Blunt story came out, that they were getting a specially-written sequel to their television thrills.

But for many people, the revelations hit harder, and *The Times* tried to create a kind of Dreyfus affair out of them. In a leading article at the end of November, it set out to make the condemnation of Blunt the condemnation of a whole intellectual and moral milieu.

Blunt had started working for the Russians at Cambridge University in the mid-thirties. At that time, he was a member of a group of mainly homosexual undergraduates and young dons who had persuaded themselves that Soviet Communism was the only bulwark against Fascism. When he was interviewed in November on television about his treachery, he declared he had done what he'd done out of conscience, though now he preferred the British way of life to the Soviet. ("What, old mole," one was inclined to think at that point, "canst move in the earth so fast?")

But *The Times* portrayed this Cambridge background in quite a different light. It argued that these young men were disciples of Bloomsbury, who had rejected traditional and trustworthy moral values in favour of the dubious loyalty of "personal relationships." E. M. Forster was picked out by *The Times* as the presiding guru of this group, and was particularly attacked for his remark: "If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country." Getting rather carried away by its argument (and striking a wild blow for monetarism, which it has also been supporting of late), the

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newspaper even went so far as to suggest that Keynes's whole economic theory had its origins in this unhealthy state of mind. It was the "moral relativism" of these Cambridge homosexuals, with which the newspaper connected him, that had caused him to resent monetary rules like the gold standard, and so to sell England down the river in another way.

Unfortunately for *The Times,* there was a gremlin—or perhaps a mole—in their composing room that night, and the final peroration in the article contained a disastrous misprint. These Cambridge influences, it concluded, had led to "the destruction of those obsolete [*sic*] standards of loyalty on which a democratic society depends."

Many correspondents took up the cudgels on the *Times* letters page. It was argued, quite convincingly I think, that Forster's belief in the importance of friendship was in no way opposed to morality. If one looked carefully at his words, one saw that they implied a profound attachment to one's country, and one that was very hard to defy. What Forster was saying was simply that nations existed to serve individuals, and that it was far too easy to forget *that.* In fact, the biographer of Forster, P. N. Furbank, remarked to me that what Blunt had done was precisely the opposite of what Forster had been recommending—he had betrayed friends in favour of an abstraction, namely Soviet Communism.

So it was possible to stand by Forster, without excusing Blunt. Yet Blunt's actions still remained a problem for the liberal-minded. His appeal to conscience was the bothersome thing. Conscience! There was an object of liberal piety if ever there was one. Yet most liberals had to admit feeling as great a revulsion at Blunt's treachery as anyone else. They could take refuge in disliking the man, who seemed as hard as nails, and quite unrepentant about any harm he might have done to Britain (it was never clear exactly what he had done). However, that didn't really solve the problem.

In the end, many people simply concluded that "conscience" just wasn't good enough as an excuse, after all. In a country like ours that was more or less democratic, even in the thirties, and where dissent could be freely expressed, to go behind the backs of your fellow-countrymen and work against them on the grounds that you knew better what their real interests were, was to set your "conscience" far too high above the judgments of others, and to be guilty of a devilish arrogance that didn't leave your conscience worth very much.

Yet even this conclusion left some of our liberals feeling dissatisfied—it was a little too neat and tidy to be the last word. Perhaps, to be honest, they did feel a little unquestioning patriotism in spite of everything.

Well, that was one area in which liberal ideas got a shaking-up. Another was over the question of the right to publish pornography.

For several years now, hard-porn bookshops and cinema clubs have flourished in the towns of England. Many people think they are harmless; many people hate them. (Some people go to them.) In 1977, the government set up a committee to look into the laws that govern, or should govern, such matters. They chose an interesting team. The chairman was

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ANTHOLOGY OF MAGAZINE VERSE & YEARBOOK OF AMERICAN POETRY

Edited by
ALAN F. PATER
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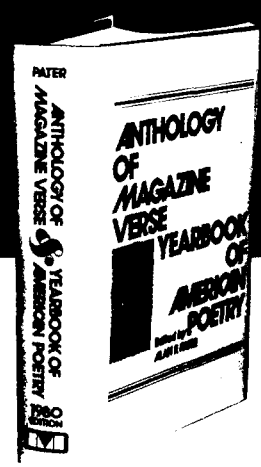
Amherst College;
Advisory Editor,
The Hudson Review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Bernard Williams, a brilliant young philosopher who in the meanwhile has become Provost of King's College, Cambridge ("That wretched Cambridge again!" some people have been saying.). Its other members included a bishop, a judge, a professor of French literature, a writer on psychiatry and a film critic.

The committee has now produced its report, a superb piece of writing, witty and elegant, as well as being extremely clearly thought out. It takes the view that the present laws are a chaos. They depend mainly on the question whether a work has a "tendency to deprave or corrupt," in which case its publishers can be punished; and this in the past has meant a line of solid English policemen marching into the witness box to declare they have been depraved by a girlie magazine. More and more, as a result, the law is neglected, or strikes intermittently and arbitrarily. There is a defence available for some works on the grounds that they serve the public good through their artistic or scientific merit. But the committee has a good remark about the hopelessness of this procedure:

> It is not surprising that many absurd things have been said in the course of such proceedings, as by the distinguished authority who was trapped into trying to think of otherwise unknown facts about 18th century London which one might learn from *Fanny Hill.* We have considerable sympathy for those who have gallantly gone to bat for works of art under these rules, but we can only regard the rules as absurd, as many of them must also have done.

So the committee suggest that the law should start again from scratch. It proposes that no work should be banned or prosecuted unless it can be proved to do actual harm to someone. Here the report firmly bases its argument on the boldest and best of liberal principles, invoking the great name of John Stuart Mill in its support: it supposes that people can read or see or do what they like provided they don't hurt one another. It then looks for hard evidence that pornographic books have harmed people or led them into bad behaviour, and it finds virtually none. It makes another good remark at this point:

> It has been said to us as an argument for the suppression of pornography: "If good books have good effects, then bad books must have bad effects." This does not even follow: if good books have good effects, it may be that all bad books do is fail to have good effects . . . Bad books may merely do nothing.

So the only works it thinks should be absolutely banned are those that "sexually exploit" the people who take part in producing them—in particular, of course, those that employ, or would employ, children. Apart from that, it only wants "restriction" of pornography—in other words, keeping it out of public places where people who don't want to see it might be forced to.

These outright libertarian proposals have led to cries of outrage from

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anti-pornography campaigners like Mrs Mary Whitehouse (one wonders what that good lady thinks of the fact that a popular porn mag is called *Whitehouse,* presumably as a joky compliment to the enemy). Yet what is most interesting, perhaps, about the report is the sensitivity it shows towards those who argue a different case, and indeed the strong hint of personal revulsion felt by most of the committee for the awful books and films they had to study. The report speaks almost tenderly of people who "have obviously been very moved by sentiments not just about pornography itself, but about certain underlying features of the modern world, and express in some cases nostalgia, in others an aspiration, for a world where not just sexuality but human relations more generally were controlled by a firmer and more effective morality."

And in the paragraph that goes on from that last quotation, it is openly derisive of a certain kind of "liberal" permissiveness:

> Many of these submissions are evidently deeply sincere [i.e. the ones I've just mentioned]. Some of them indeed speak more for "the party of humanity" than does a certain kind of "liberal" evidence which we have received, which complacently extols the high task of furthering enlightenment and human fulfilment which, it claims, is sustained by the more literate kind of porno magazine. Perhaps the most striking example of humbug that came our way was the pretence that present day commercial pornography represents some fulfilment of liberal and progressive hopes.

As yet, it is not known whether the government intends to act on the advice of the committee—it has rather a lot of other matters on its plate. But the report is certainly one of the "books of the year"—and can be purchased from Her Majesty's Stationery Office for £5.25.

What have the poets been up to? Cambridge seems to have been prominent there, too (I admit it as an Oxford man). The big English chain of newsagents, W. H. Smith, gives a £1,000 literary prize every year, leaving the choice to a panel of independent judges, and this year it was won by the poet Thom Gunn, for his *Selected Poems 1950–1975.*

The prize was awarded at a lunch on the top floor of Smith's enormous new block of offices, Strand House, on a clear spring day, with only the white drift of smoke from the central-heating systems of other tower blocks stirring in the London sky. (It looked like an image from a Thom Gunn poem.) Gunn couldn't come, because he lives in California now, and this was his teaching term at the university. But his prize was given him *in absentia* by Ted Hughes. Both poets are just fifty now, and both were at Cambridge thirty years ago.

Hughes made a handsome speech in which he described himself going up to Cambridge to study after two years' national service in the Royal Air Force, "frozen and stupefied," obsessively reading only "five favourite classics, none of them later than the *Collected Poems* of Yeats." Then he

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came across the poems of Gunn in an undergraduate magazine, so quick, so alive, so assured; and they gave him a conviction, for the first time, that it was possible to write new poems.

Gunn sent a message from America, saying he'd just read an old proverb quoted by Dickens in *Little Dorrit,* "A cat with gloves on doesn't catch any mice." He hoped he wouldn't let the prize turn into a pair of gloves for him. A San Francisco poet he knew had given him a complementary proverb: "Mice in high heels get caught by cats." Well, he'd go on trying to catch the mice of poetry—he'd never been much interested in mice in high heels, anyway.

Hughes towered over the proceedings, very tall, with his great horse's head; and his own new book of poems, *Moortown,* showed that his exquisite mimicry of animals, insects or weather is as powerful as ever, while his *alter ego,* Byronic or Promethean, goes on seeking the right, steely stance with which to confront earth's horrors.

The book of poems that's been most praised lately, though, has been the new volume by an Irish poet ten years younger than Hughes and Gunn, Seamus Heaney. Heaney began as a nature poet, but in the new book, *Field Work,* he puts his supple line and lovely, sensuous imagination to work at evoking a sense of Ireland at peace—creating an ideal yet plausible landscape in which the Irish gifts, spontaneity, wit, happiness in rural pursuits, are at home in the richness of its countryside. In an elegy on a dead musician friend, for instance, he catches that unity and harmony when he says:

> He conducted the Ulster Orchestra
> like a drover with an ashplant
> herding them south.

But Ireland is not at peace by any means, and a book about it cannot avoid some mention of the IRA terrorists. The one serious criticism the book received in England was that when Heaney brings them in, he avoids taking up an attitude to them by turning them into mythological echoes of earlier Irish political attitudes. Ireland may breed poets; but it is no easier than it ever was to go on being a poet there.

As for the man whom most people still consider the best living English poet, Philip Larkin, he has not published a single poem, let alone a book of them, for a long time. I asked him recently if he had, by chance, written any poems of late. "Poems?" he said. "What are they?"

Larkin did, however, manage to write a reply to an appeal sent out by a lively little magazine, *PN Review* (the "*PN*" incorporates an earlier title, *Poetry Nation*). The magazine is up in arms against the declining use in English churches of the Authorised Version of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer, and the increasing use of characterless modern versions of both works. It published an issue containing comments on the matter

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that it had invited from numerous writers, and it also organised a series of petitions to the General Synod of the Church of England.

What was especially striking was how many writers, academics, actors, musicians and politicians, who were freethinkers or even avowed atheists, eagerly signed the petitions. More was at stake than just religion, they evidently felt (if such an expression can be allowed, even in an irreligious age). Larkin's comment was very representative (the chief culprit among various modern versions of the Bible was the one known as the New English Bible, published a few years back by Oxford University Press):

> Some years ago I had the honour to serve briefly as an adviser to the NEB . . . But the whole text seemed to me lacking in vitality, rhythm, distinction and above all memorability, and I found myself revising almost every sentence—not, I hasten to say, in the direction of poetic prose, but simply, as I thought, into something more forceful. Very likely I was deluding myself: in fact after about a year they quietly stopped sending me anything, so I presume I had been weighed in the balance and found wanting . . .

The novelist Iris Murdoch observed:

> The loss of lively and natural access to the Authorised Version of the Bible and Crammer's Book of Common Prayer is a literary loss comparable to losing touch with Shakespeare. It is also, whether or not one believes in God, a spiritual loss . . . These words have been treasured and understood for centuries by people whose use made of them timeless language, perfectly comprehensible and illuminating . . .

So, once again, liberals and rationalists had to rally to a cause which, not so long ago, many would have thought had nothing to do with them.

I've said nothing in this letter about the more strictly political aspects of these changes in feeling, which were in part the reason why a Conservative government was elected last year. Many moderate voters who normally vote Labour (besides Liberals with a capital "L" who support the Liberal Party) were drawn to vote Conservative this time, even if with misgivings. The Conservative Party promised to cut government spending and so, they claimed, bring down inflation, even if the first result was higher unemployment; they wanted to limit the powers of the trade unions; they wanted to save the grammar schools for brighter children, instead of letting them make their way as best they could in comprehensive schools where all levels of ability were found. With all these policies, voters who still thought themselves to be liberal-minded found themselves uneasily agreeing—and voted Conservative.

A friend of mine who did just that recently became acquainted with a left-wing journalist, who was only aware of the opinions my friend was currently expressing. He sent my friend a copy of an article he'd written,

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adding "This will show you why a Conservative should vote Labour." My friend wrote back: "That's not the point; I've been giving you reasons why a Labour supporter should vote Conservative."

Such are our present confusions—worrying to those who live among them, very often, but perhaps of some little historical and moral interest. Come soon, and see for yourself!

Yours,
DERWENT MAY

Notes on Contributors

DERWENT MAY is Literary Editor of *The Listener* in London. His most recent novel is *A Revenger's Comedy* (Chatto & Windus).

WILLIAM JAY SMITH's memoir, *Army Brat,* will be published in October by Persea Books, which will also bring out his new collection of poetry, *The Traveler's Tree, New and Selected Poems.* Delacorte Press is publishing a selection of his children's poems, *Laughing Time, Nonsense Poems.*

ALFRED CORN's next collection of poems, *A Various Light,* will be published in the fall by Viking Penguin.

DAVID BROMWICH teaches English at Princeton University.

ROBERT PHILLIPS' poetry collections are *Inner Weather* (1966), *The Pregnant Man* (1978), and *Running on Empty,* forthcoming from Doubleday.

JAY PARINI's recent work includes *The Love Run,* a novel (Little, Brown) and *Theodore Roethke: An American Romantic* (Univ. of Massachusetts Press).

PHILIP DACEY teaches at Southwest State University in Minnesota.

NANCY LEE COUTO* is working toward an M.F.A. in English at Cornell University.

KIM YONG IK* teaches Creative Writing and Eastern Asian Literature at Duquesne University. He has just completed a new novel, *Gourd Hollow Dance.*

LUCILLE DAY* is a curriculum specialist for a project to increase girls' interest and achievement in science and math in the Novato Unified Schools, California.

This is KRISTOPHER JOHNSON's* first publication in a national magazine. He graduated this summer from Dartmouth.

REGINALD GIBBONS* edited *The Poet's Work* (Houghton Mifflin), and has translated the *Selected Poems of Luis Cernuda* (Univ. of California Press) and *Guillén on Guillén* (Princeton Univ. Press).

A Professor of English at Yale, PATRICIA MEYER SPACKS is completing a book on the social mythology of adolescence, to be entitled *The Young Idea.*

THOMAS R. SMITH* wrote the article on Wyndham Lewis for the *Academic American Encyclopedia* (Arete Publishing Co.). This is his first publication in a U.S. magazine.

EMILY GROSHOLZ teaches Philosophy at Pennsylvania State University's main campus.

Asterisk indicates a new contributor.

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James Wright died on March 25. His poems first appeared in The Hudson Review in our Autumn 1955 issue, and he was a frequent contributor thereafter. The poems that follow were written in the spring of 1979 while he was making what was to be his last trip to Europe.

From his letter of June 1 to The Hudson Review: "We arrived here in Sirmione [Italy] just one week ago. After a good deal of wandering and a lot of work in my notebook, I have been happy at the chance to sit here . . . and try to draw some things together. One result of this work has been [these] new pieces."

JAMES WRIGHT

Reading a 1979 Inscription on Belli's Monument

It is not only the Romans who are gone.
Belli, unhappy a century ago,
Won from the world his fashionable stone.
Where it stands now, he doesn't even know.
Across the Tiber, near Trastevere,
His top hat teetered on his head with care,
Brushed like a gentleman, he cannot see
The latest Romans who succeed him there.

One of them bravely climbed his pedestal
And sprayed a scarlet MERDA on his shawl.
This afternoon, I pray his hidden grave
Lies nameless somewhere in the hills, while rain
Fusses and frets to rinse away the stain.
Rain might erase when marble cannot save.

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Rain on the Spanish Steps

I did not want to go back there again.
The very nobility of the ancient place
Seemed the more desolate in its ugliness,
The more the idlers sprawled there in the sun.
One punched a filthy needle in his vein.
Another nuzzled at two flopping dugs
Beneath an eyeless face. The very dogs
Of Rome slunk away, vomiting. But then

The sky darkened with anger, sudden rain
Attacked the hilltop tower behind the stair.
Agile as roaches in a fire, the scum
Of Europe and America fled down.
And yet I do not want to go back there.
Let the sky fall, all over broken Rome.

A Dark Moor Bird

A dark moor bird has come down from the mountains
To test the season.
He flies low across the Adige and seines
The brilliant web of his shadow behind him.
Slender and sure,
His wings give him the nobility
Of a small swan.
But his voice
Ruins it, he has seen me and he can't
Shut up about it.
He sounds
Like a plump chicken nagging a raccoon
Who is trying to get out of the henhouse
With a little dignity.

I wonder why the beautiful moor bird
Won't leave me alone.

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All I am doing is standing here,
Turning to stone,
Believing he will build a strong nest
Along the Adige, hoping
He will never die.

Wherever Home Is

Leonardo da Vinci, haggard in basalt stone,
Will soon be gone,
A frivolous face lost in wisteria flowers.
They are turning gray and dying
All over his body.
Subtlest of all wanderers
Who live beautifully by living on other lives,
They cannot find a warm vein
In Leonardo, and Leonardo
Himself will soon
Be gone.

Good riddance a little while to the insane.
Although the wisteria gets nowhere
And the sea wind crumbles Leonardo down,
A new lizard frolicks in the cold sunlight
Between Leonardo's thumb and his palette.
One brief lizard
Lavishes on Leonardo and on me
The whole Spring.

Goodbye to Leonardo, good riddance
To decaying madmen who cannot keep alive
The wanderers among trees.
I am going home with the lizard,
Wherever home is,
And lie beside him unguarded
In the clear sunlight.
We will lift our faces even if it rains.
We will both turn green.

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The Vestal in the Forum

This morning I do not despair
For the impersonal hatred that the cold
Wind seems to feel
When it slips fingers into the flaws
Of lovely things men made,
The shoulders of a stone girl
Pitted by winter.
Not a Spring passes but the roses
Grow stronger in their support of the wind,
And now they are conquerors,
Not garlands any more,
Of this one face:
Dimming,
Clearer to me than most living faces.
The slow wind and the slow roses
Are ruining an eyebrow here, a mole there.
But in this little while
Before she is gone, her very haggardness
Amazes me. A dissolving
Stone, she seems to change from stone to something
Frail, to someone I can know, someone
I can almost name.

A Farewell: To the Mayor of Toulouse

Your Honor, I declare I must go back
To Hackensack, and take another look;
Or Minneapolis, whose broken back
Sags in the Mississippi like a sock;
Or Newark, where the epigones of Rock
Hack like a cancerous mastodon in pain;
Or Pasco, Washington, that Kipling took
For Hell. It was like sitting on a tack.
It stuck him till he turned insomniac.
I don't know what it looks like in the rain.

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But even Los Angeles could meet its master
Here in the towering sunlight of Provence.
The Boys' Industrial High School in Lancaster,
Ohio, has nothing in your Saint Sernin's.
As for its windows, only Al Capone's
Mother could love that suppurating stain,
Its cold bells rattling like a dead snake's bones.
I don't know what it sounds like in the rain.

As self-appointed chairman of the board
Of strangers in your city of Toulouse,
I wrap my scarf about me and award
The prize in strict American to youse:
A slowly burning packet of Galloise,
A miserably drying ball-point pen,
Whatever I can scrape from my damp shoes.
I don't know what it looks like in the rain.

ENVOI

Your Honor, long before your *flics* peruse
This cracked ballade, I will be safe in Spain.
Today I leave your city of Toulouse.
Grant me another rhyme before I'm gone:
I took one stroll along your gray Garronne.
The leprous waters glittered in the sun.

I don't know what it looks like in the rain.

CODA

For all I know, you'd like to let me know.
But don't call me, Your Honor. I'll call you.

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WILLIAM JAY SMITH

Army Brat

> The army is a nation within the nation. . . . Everyday words sometimes have highly appropriate connotations. To obey or command in an army is indeed to *serve*. We must deplore the servitude, but we should admire the slaves.
>
> —Alfred de Vigny, *The Military Condition (Servitude et Grandeur Militaires*, 1835), translated by Marguerite Barnett

ONE OF MY EARLY CHILDHOOD MEMORIES is of a picnic at one corner of the parade ground at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, on the edge of the Mississippi, just south of St. Louis. An old friend of my mother's is visiting from the South with her small daughter, and we have just taken them on a tour of the Barracks and have had our picnic lunch on an Army blanket spread out on the grass. My mother is wearing a hat that is my favorite, one with a high crown on which red and blue feathers are brushed sideways around it rather than standing up as feathers usually do. It is as if birds of the brightest and softest plumage were circling her head in steady flight. My brother and I have on our short black trousers with the pongee blouses that my mother has made; each of us has also a black straw hat with an elastic under the chin. Off in the distance, led by the band in which my father is playing his clarinet, soldiers are marching up and down. The day is filled with gaiety and pomp and color. While the ladies talk and laugh in their birdlike way, we children run endlessly about. Finally the sun begins to set, the bugle sounds retreat, and still we stay on. As it slowly gets dark I find myself chasing my black hat across the grass. Dark surges suddenly in and the hat's black shiny edges merge with the dark edge of the parade ground. I have a moment of panic, feeling that the hat will just go on circling through the dark to the very end of the parade ground, over the high bluff, and into the wide and muddy river. I put out my hand—almost miraculously it seems—to the exact spot where it is.

Now as I reach back in memory through the darkness of many years I shall try with patience to find the shining edges of that world, lost like the hat, touch them, and bring them back once more—if concentration and luck will allow—to their proper place.

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I grew up an Army brat, indelibly marked by my youthful association with my father's profession. As a corporal in the Sixth Infantry Band, my father was not transferred regularly from one post to another, and so, unlike many Army brats, I do not have a patchwork of memories of various posts scattered across the country and around the world, but a single vision of the twenty years spent in and around a particular one, Jefferson Barracks, then a post of major importance. I went there with my father, my mother, and my brother not long after World War I and left at the time of our entry into World War II. It is to those years between the two wars—1921 to 1941—and to my life with the peace-time, "brown-boot" Army that I wish now to turn.

SPIT AND POLISH

They are covered with countless crosses;
  Plumes of princely types
Like parasitic mosses
  Sweep their campaign stripes.

—so begins one of my early poems. The lines were prompted not by any particular officer but probably by the regular Friday afternoon reviews or dress parades that I had watched over the years. On these occasions the entire regiment sparkled as if it had just stepped out of a box of toys onto the green turf of the parade ground.

During the twenties and thirties everything inside and out at Jefferson Barracks looked as if it had just been scrubbed and polished—for the very good reason that it no doubt had been. Nothing was left uncared for, right down to the lowliest mule. Indeed, the mules were the pride of the post. The stables were immaculate, and the mules were so combed and curried by the "mule-skinners" of Service Company that they looked as if they had been groomed for races rather than for their lowly duty of dragging equipment. We were so accustomed to seeing the mules cared for in this fashion that when my brother and I went back to visit my grandmother and aunt and uncle on the farm in Louisiana and were shown my uncle's mule, Richie refused to accept it as such. "That's not a mule," he said, "that's just a donkey!"

Spit and polish—those were the words of the day. And they were even more the words from 1932 to 1934 when Col. Walter Krueger

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was commanding officer. Born in Prussia, Krueger, at the time the youngest colonel in the service, had come to the United States at the age of eight and had enlisted as a private in the Army at the age of seventeen. He had fought in the Spanish-American War and the Philippine Insurrection, and was decorated for distinguished service at Chateau Thiery and in the Meuse-Argonne in France. He became the commanding general of the United States Sixth Army during World War II, the first private to rise to four-star rank. At the end of the war, he had completed plans for the largest amphibious operation in history—an assault on Japan that would have involved 800,000 men—if the dropping of the atomic bomb had not made it unnecessary. Men who served under him at Jefferson Barracks remember his mania for keeping everything trim and neat. He would sneak around, they say, on surprise inspections to every corner of the barracks, into the kitchens and the latrines. The prisoners worked regularly extracting every blade of grass from the blocks of limestone in the gutters along the parade ground, and the men waxed and polished the floors of their barracks. The plain wooden floors were cleaned with sand rock and lye water and then waxed. Johnson's wax was applied with a Johnson bar consisting of a piece of rug wrapped around a weight on a long handle. At a later date the floors were covered with "battleship linoleum," which was one quarter inch thick and would not chip or scratch. "Shine the brass!" Colonel Krueger ordered, and every bit of visible brass would sparkle. Brass cuspidors were placed in the corners of almost every barracks room. Filled with fresh water, they shone, ready for use, but they were never used. They were there for show: cigarettes and cigar butts were thrown in a butt can that was removed and hidden during regular inspections.

There were weekly white-glove inspections not just of the barracks but of the enlisted men's quarters as well. In the former Knights of Columbus Building where we lived, there was always great anxiety on Saturday morning. As the officers made their rounds, there would be knocks of warning on the beaverboard walls separating the quarters to notify the neighbors that the officers were approaching and to give them time to put away their home brew or other unwelcome or unsightly objects.

The brass shone in the enlisted men's quarters as well: the flower vases, fashioned from sawed-off shells, glowed on delicate white doilies that the women had crocheted. The prisoners did the hard work, such as cutting the grass, cleaning the walks, hauling coal,

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and washing the windows for enlisted men as well as for officers. Such was the attention to cleanliness that the clothes of the lowest enlisted man's children were usually spotless. Even the prostitutes who turned up regularly at noon on payday at the trolley station seemed to have dressed in keeping with the polished look of the post. With frizzled hair showing the recent effects of the hot curling iron and faces heavily made up, they often wore evening dresses of bright red or green satin, but because their assignations were usually somewhere in the woods they also wore tennis shoes so that they might more readily cope with the difficult terrain.

In addition to the regular inspections of the barracks, there were frequent eight- or ten-mile hikes with full packs and in the summer visits to the rifle range at Arcadia, Missouri, where each man had to qualify. It was to Arcadia that the mules were retired when they became too old for service. The mules were treated like soldiers: each had his serial number (the mule's was branded on his left hip), and like the soldier each one had to be accounted for and provided with a decent retirement. One summer the regiment hiked to Battle Creek, Michigan, for maneuvers, taking twenty-one days and nights. Along with the other constant inspections there were, of course, the routine "short-arm" inspections (for venereal disease). At one such inspection a bandsman was found to have gonorrhea, but rather than having to pay the usual penalty of being busted and having his pay docked, he was able to beat the system. By asking that she also be examined, he was able to prove that he had contracted the disease from his wife, who had picked it up from another man while her husband was away on the rifle range. The man lost his wife, but kept his rating.

"Shine the brass!" the Colonel ordered, and for a bandsman like my father there was plenty of brass to shine. A photograph of the Third Cavalry Band in 1894 shows the men in tunics with three rows of buttons and helmets with large metal plaques in front that make them look as if they have just walked off the stage from some comic opera. My father's uniform was not that fancy but it took just as much care. To begin with, every button had to be polished, and as they were heavily embossed, the task took attention and elbow grease. Father's button board from the PX was V-shaped, of heavy cardboard, made to hook around each button. He applied a combination of salt, vinegar, and scrubbing powder, followed by jeweler's rouge, and a final polishing with a Blitz Cloth. (In 1843 a school for infantry brigade drill had been established at Jefferson

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Barracks, and it was here that the Third Infantry, because of its glittering look on parade, won the nickname of "Buffsticks," from the constant use of just such a slotted button board.)

The brass was quite enough in itself, but the leggings were a real nightmare. The ordinary canvas leggings—puttees—worn in World War I, had been replaced by wool wrap-around leggings, and winding these properly was an art in itself. You had to start from the top of the shoe in just the proper way so that if it rained the water would run off each succeeding layer. In addition, for parades the Band wore white canvas leggings, the strings of which had to be bleached and the brass tips of the strings polished. The leggings themselves had to be scrubbed with brushes. The Band also had to wear white web belts, which the men had to scrub or "blanco" with a Paris-green powder. And every brass eyelet on the belt had to be polished. For this job my father had what was called a "whirligig," in which a polishing surface would descend in whirling yoyo-fashion on each eyelet. This tool did its work so effectively that it was much in demand and was frequently rented out to his fellow bandsmen.

Special care, of course, had to be taken with rifles. The gunstocks were made to shine like brass. One of the sergeants in B Company was known as "Gunrack" Miller because he was so particular about his rifle that he never wanted to take it from the rack. He would put linseed oil on the gunstock and rub it for hours over and over with the palm of his hand.

Colonel Krueger decided at one point that he did not like the color of the men's shoes or garrison belts. And soon the order went out for them to be dyed a darker brown. This was not easily accomplished, and it took constant surveillance to keep the results from looking messy.

Ordinarily the men wore a woolen serge uniform in winter, one that had to be cleaned and pressed and kept pressed, with a straight black cotton necktie, and in summer a khaki uniform and a thin khaki necktie. The khakis—or "sun tans"—were, of course, washable, but since they had to be starched, they were not always so easy to handle. Some of the officers, not content with the way the Post Laundry did their khaki trousers, took them to the wives of enlisted men so that they might get special attention. Capt. James Piston, a bachelor living at the Officers' Club, sought out Mrs. Velma Gholson, the wife of Sergeant Gholson of B Company. Captain Piston explained to her that he wanted his trousers

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starched so stiff they would stand up. Mrs. Gholson obliged, but the next week Captain Piston sent a note, saying, "A little more starch, please." Mrs. Gholson increased the amount, and a second note came back, requesting still more starch. The third time she decided to prepare them as she did the nurses' caps, by washing and drying them first and then putting them through hot starch. Captain Piston was delighted and strutted out like a knight who had donned new armor for the weekly review. Unfortunately it rained, and he found himself encased in what amounted to plaster. The following week he sent a final request, "Not quite so much starch, please."

The sun tans, whether starched stiff or not, were at least fairly cool. But Colonel Kreuger decided that khaki for summer was messy and that wool was the thing. Although it was warm, it had the advantage of absorbing perspiration, which did not show through until the men were ready to keel over in the hundred-degree heat. The men would return from the Friday afternoon reviews soaked to the skin, and then the woolen uniform would have to be readied for the next day. Colonel Krueger also enjoyed making speeches, and from time to time he would assemble the men of the regiment in the Post Theater and address them on the subject of discipline. "You must learn to be led before you can learn to lead," he would tell them.

While much of a soldier's time was ordinarily spent in carrying out orders, a good amount was also spent in finding ways of not carrying them out or beating the system in one way or another—which under Colonel Krueger became increasingly difficult. The routine of the day went something like this: 5:30 a.m. reveille; 6:00 a.m. breakfast (the Band ate with Service Company); at 7:30 a.m. the entire regiment would line up on the parade ground in undershirts and trousers for half an hour of calisthenics and butts manual; 8:00 a.m. drill call (for the line companies squad drill, for the Band, rehearsal); 11:30 a.m. guard mount (the changing of the guard), which was always held in front of the old H Company on the corner of the parade ground next to the Headquarters Building; 12:00 noon chow (dinner); from 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. fatigue. (Some men had special assignments and others rested. During this period the old soldiers would stretch out on their bunks, and the young recruits, fearing their wrath and careful not to disturb them, would tiptoe in stocking feet up glossy stairs still smelling from their heavy application of floor wax.) The regiment would fall out

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about 4:00 p.m. for review for about an hour (or on Friday for the regular weekly review). At 5:00 p.m. retreat sounded. Before Colonel Krueger's time, the Band had not been required to turn out for retreat; a single bugler (buglers were not connected with the Band) had sufficed. But Colonel Krueger decided that the full Band should be present for retreat seven days a week. At 6:00 p.m. chow (supper), followed by 9:00 p.m. tattoo and 10:00 p.m. taps, at which time lights went out except in the latrines and entrances. If poker or crap games were in progress, they moved to the latrines or somewhere like the tailor's shop in the basement that was tucked away from general view— and there they frequently continued all night long.

The daily routine under Colonel Krueger was bad enough, but when Gen. Preston D. Brown took over as corps area commander, it was followed by what the men called "General Brown's reign of terror." General Brown instituted a nightly bed check at 11:00 p.m. Only married men were exempt and those who tried to avoid it, as one bandsman did by filling his bed with two hefty barracks bags, were readily apprehended. Two men, speeding back from St. Louis for bed check after a night on the town, wheeled into a sinkhole and were both killed. Bed check was dropped not long afterward.

In one of Bill Mauldin's famous cartoons two generals are shown contemplating a spectacular sunset. "It's a beautiful view," one says to the other. "Is there one for the enlisted men?" If an enlisted man dared to walk out in the company of an officer to look at the sun setting behind the parade ground at Jefferson Barracks at the time that I knew it, he would have had to keep a pace or two to his left and rear. And he would, of course, always have to show the utmost respect in addressing him. An enlisted man was required to give his rating, name, and serial number, and to refer to the officer in the third person. One of the men who served with my father was Pvt.—later, in World War II, Master Sgt.—William F. Alden, who became historian of the Sixth Infantry. Like many of the recruits of the day, he came from a small town in southern Illinois. When he first arrived at the post, the men in his squad room found on his bunk his hometown newspaper with an article about him bearing the headline: LOCAL BOY JOINS ARMY. From that day on he was known by all the men as "Local Boy."

Alden recalls going in to see Captain Henderson, the Commanding Officer of Service Company, to request permission to get married.

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"Local Boy," standing at attention, said, "Sir, Pvt. William F. Alden, Serial No. 6829056, desires the permission of the company commander to be married on the twenty-eighth day of September 1934, if it so pleases the commanding officer."

"Sit down, Alden," Captain Henderson replied. "You know you're a damn fool. Any man who asks a woman to share the life of the military is a damn fool."

Then, after a long tirade outlining all that Alden would be putting his bride through, he concluded: "I'll send a letter along, and we'll see what we get back." And that meant that there would be no problem.

The regular complement of the Band was twenty-eight men. There was a warrant officer, who was bandmaster, a first sergeant, a staff sergeant, four sergeants, two corporals, and the others were privates, first, second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth class. The privates—the "peons" my father called them—had the lowliest duties, K.P. (Kitchen Police) and general policing up. A corporal like my father, in charge of a detail or squad of eight men, would police the peons. Some men like "Local Boy" Alden were members of Service Company but were attached to the Band for duty until a permanent slot opened up. These men often drew duty cleaning up the stables. They would be put on what they called "pilot" detail, which, they said, meant simply "pile it here" and "pile it there."

The instruments for the bandsmen were furnished, but my father owned his own clarinet. Resting in segments in its royal purple plush-lined case, it received more attention than his rifle. He had learned to play the clarinet in his Winnfield, Louisiana, high school. During his hitch in the Navy he joined the band in order to avoid scrubbing decks. He played well and could have been a really fine musician if he had wanted to. Even with drinking and gambling, he managed to practice regularly.

The notes of the clarinet still have for me a special charm. When I listened while my father practiced in front of his music stand on a still afternoon, his hands moving dextrously up and down the stops, the wind at the window, redolent of the sweet, green woods, seemed itself to be playing the instrument, calling for me to follow to distant fern-enclosed glades and cool limestone caverns.

Gen. George S. Brown, when Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, remarked that Great Britain was no longer a world power: "All they've got are generals and admirals and bands." The United States has never been lacking in all three. From the beginning bands were an important part of life at Jefferson Barracks, as

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they had been on all frontier posts. Regulations in 1861 provided for regimental bands and band leaders. Bandsmen in combat were supposed to be litter-bearers, but more often they played to bolster the morale of the forces. When General Custer and his troops marched off from Fort Lincoln, North Dakota, in 1876 to meet their death at the Little Big Horn, the Seventh Cavalry Band played "The Girl I Left Behind Me," while Army wives and their children waved farewell.

The Sixth Infantry made an excellent impression when it marched because of the lively flourish of its music and especially because of the commanding presence of its drum major. Sgt. "Slim" Chapman, six feet four inches tall, towered over the others and led them through their intricate manuevers on the parade ground. The Band was the center of the Friday afternoon reviews and played concerts on Sundays and holidays in the bandstand in front of the Officers' Club. It was also an important part of the celebration on Memorial Day, when people flocked out from St. Louis to honor the dead in the Post Cemetery, and on Regimental Day, when the Sixth Infantry would review its past accomplishments and take cognizance of its present potential.

While my father had his routine, my mother also had hers. First of all, it was keeping the house clean and herself and her children clothed and fed. Keeping growing children clothed on the little money available was a problem, but in one way or another the Army helped. The men could draw any number of things for their families—beds, bedding, furniture. They could draw Army blankets, some of which ended up on the backs of their offspring. In the schools they attended in South St. Louis, children from Jefferson Barracks were easily spotted because of their O.D. (olive drab) coats, jackets, and mackinaws decorated with U.S. Army brass buttons.

The men could also draw as much woolen underwear as they wanted, and so most of them would, like my father, draw enough extra underwear for their children. My mother would cut it down, and although it scratched, it got us through the winter. Inett Layton, the daughter of Sgt. Boyd Layton, the Mess Sergeant of Service Company, and my constant companion, recalls that for young girls the annual routine went like this: "At Easter woolen underwear came off, and patent leather shoes and whoopie socks went on."

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Winter underwear came whole, but summer underwear was another thing. Sergeant Layton would bring home the flour sacks from his mess, and my mother would bleach them to remove the labels and make them into B.V.D.s for his children and hers. My mother's sewing prowess became well known, and she soon found herself employed by friends and neighbors, and finally, of course, by the officers' wives. From the time we moved onto the post, dressmaking occupied a great part of her time. The hum of my mother's sewing machine accompanied the trill of my father's clarinet on evenings when the only sounds outside were the hoot of the owls in the big oaks or taps echoing through the woods. Some of the officers' wives were not exactly beautifully proportioned. The uglier they were—the more big-hipped and sway-backed—the more impossible seemed their demands. They would arrive with a flowery bundle of stuff draped over one arm, a dress or an outfit to be made over. And my mother somehow accepted them all, no matter how impossible their requests. For remaking any sort of frock, which frequently amounted to a virtual miracle, she charged $2.50, which the ladies often paid under protest. To make a plain cotton dress, for which she would often draw the pattern herself, she charged only fifty cents. Her dressmaking turned our little house into a place of magic, the swatches of bright material whisked through the air like bright tropical birds, all brought suddenly to rest each in its proper place. And no matter how little money there was, she seemed always to be able to whip up something for herself that had just the right shape and color and was the envy of her less imaginative neighbors.

My mother also began to serve at officers' tea parties and luncheons, mainly in the quarters of lieutenants and captains. The officers of higher rank usually had help in the house—often Filipino servants whom they had brought back from the Orient. These men did the cooking, cleaning, and baby-sitting and took complete care of the house. When no Filipinos were available, the colonel or major simply assigned an enlisted man to come to clean, cook, babysit, and serve as his chauffeur as well. These "dog-robbers" were usually young Pfc's who had no objection because this assignment meant that they would be excused from drill and from other duties.

At Jefferson Barracks, as on the frontier garrisons of the past, it was the old story of Mrs. O'Grady and the colonel's lady. In this

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case it was Mrs. Murphy, the wife of a civilian employee on the post who lived near the North Gate, who was called upon to cook for large parties at the Officers' Club, where the bachelor officers lived, or at the houses of the colonel or lieutenant colonel. It was Mrs. Murphy who first enlisted my mother to help her serve. From then on she would put on a white nurse's uniform that had been provided for her and would serve at a party for twenty people or more. The nature of these gatherings may be glimpsed from references to them in the issues of the Sunday St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, where some of the Jefferson Barracks society notes of January 1931 read like a court circular:

> Colonel and Mrs. Pegram Whitworth entertained the officers and women of the garrison with an informal reception on New Year's Day.
>
> Major and Mrs. Arthur Underwood entertained at dinner before the New Year's Eve hop.
>
> The Post Bridge Club held a bi-monthly meeting at the Officers Club Monday evening with Major and Mrs. Arnold Reeve, Captain and Mrs. Raymond I. Lovell, Captain and Mrs. Clifford D. Overfelt and Mrs. Joseph Catte as the hosts and hostesses.

Sometimes for a dinner party my mother would take me with her, and I would rest on a sofa on the screened-in porch while dinner was served inside. Since almost all the officers had been overseas, their houses were rich in wicker and mahogany furniture. Huge brass trays shone like full moons against the dark tables. I would fix my eyes on their bright surfaces and think of the miles and miles of ocean that had brought them here. The gold would slowly sink into the rising waves, the bugle would echo faintly through the dark, and I would fall asleep.

THE STILL CENTER

Garrison life alternated between complete and utter quiet and total pandemonium; there seemed to be nothing in between. But even pandemonium had to end somewhere, and one sensed very soon that it would return to the quiet from which it had come: the pot that had been brought to a boil would be taken immediately off the flames. There was stillness at the heart of the reservation at the Old Rock Spring (Sylvan Springs), where clear water trickling

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out over the pebbles said over and over—as Elizabeth Madox Roberts has said that such water does to a child—"And do you think? And do you think? And do you think?" And beyond—at the center of the occupied section of the post—was the parade ground like a great manicured scroll on which would be printed only the music of the band or the sound of feet marching over the thick turf. In the barracks men spoke in whispers and tiptoed over the polished linoleum; far-off you could hear the clicking of heels at attention or the snapping of salutes. In summer the ceiling fans in the barracks turned slowly, wafting the tufts of still air back upon themselves, moving like giant brown bugs over the surface of water. Only the blare of the bugle at reveille, tattoo, and taps cut through the quiet: a stone dropped in a clear pool.

The other side of the coin was pandemonium. There were little knots of noise—the controlled hysterical laughter of the ladies at the officers' teas, the drunken male whoops against the slow jazz tempo of the orchestra at the hops at the Officers' Club. There were loud voices at times in the squad rooms or around the swimming pool and the clash and clatter of plates in the mess halls. But it was only in the gymnasium, on the playing field, or at the boxing matches that hell really broke loose. Atkinson Hall, which had been the main mess hall for the post, was turned into a gymnasium early in the thirties, and messes were established with the individual companies. The gym soon became a focal point of activity. Entering it during the fall or winter months when basketball was in full swing was a bit like being fired from a cannon, the quick pounding of the ball down the long floor followed by the intense roar of the crowd. Men played company against company with all the energy of pent-up animals, and the others watched as if they themselves were making every play. Competition was equally keen on the baseball diamond, but the boxing matches were the most heated arena of all.

In the early twenties the Civilian Military Training Corps (C.M.T.C.) was organized, and every summer hundreds of young men came to Jefferson Barracks for a month to participate in military activity. They camped on the field across from the area that was known at the Barracks as the Western Front in rows of tents pitched on square wooden platforms. After the encampment only the cement buildings for latrines and showers at the center of the field remained. When the tents and wooden platforms were re-

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moved at the end of the summer, kids from the Western Front would swoop down on the field and scour it for coins and other treasures that had fallen through the slats.

The sinkhole on the eastern edge of the field was fitted with wooden benches and a boxing ring at the bottom. Lights were hung from the oak trees. To the semi-circular grandstand on the edge of the parade ground was added another semi-circle of bleacher seats, and this became an even larger boxing arena. Fighting was, after all, what a soldier's life was all about. Men at Fort Bellefontaine had fought with bare fists; all during the nineteenth century officers settled their disputes by dueling at Bloody Island, just off the Illinois coast, across from St. Louis, while people lined up on both banks of the river to watch.

There was always violence just below the surface of military life, a violence that led many men to blow their tops, get busted and sent to the guardhouse. But it was only in boxing that physical combat was given official sanction. Competition among the companies was so intense that men were promoted solely on their ability in the ring and were prepared like leashed animals for the regular inter-company "smokers" during the year or for the summer bouts. The competition—especially during the terrible August heat which, even under the best of circumstances, put us all on edge—was so keen that it affected everyone on the garrison, including the wives who shared every detail of their husbands' lives, and, of course, their children. Officers' wives were not exempt; indeed, some seemed to find as much release in the boxing as the men themselves. Perhaps it gave a fillip to the dull routine of their lives—or did they find erotic stimulation in the contemplation of a male slugging match? Mrs. Ford, the wife of Major Ford, a supply officer who took over briefly as commanding officer of the post in 1929, was out every evening. With her slashed red hair in its mannish cut, a cigarette dangling from her mouth, she cursed like a trooper in a rich husky voice, urging her troops on. Her troops were not the men in the ring (although she found time to shout commands at them also) but her squad of young boys selling popcorn. The profits from the sale of popcorn went to the recreation fund for the benefit of the entire garrison, and Mrs. Ford was determined to raise as much money as possible.

So every evening before sundown I would appear next to the popcorn popper, where Mrs. Ford had pulled up her snappy yel-

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low convertible. Along with several other boys all dressed in stiff duck trousers and tennis shoes, hair slicked back, I stood by the popper awaiting my basket of bags of corn and the orders from our commanding general. Mrs. Ford made us all feel that we were ourselves fighters about to go into the ring and whoever ended the evening selling the most bags would also win his golden gloves or his laurel crown. Actually our only reward was twenty-five or fifty cents a night and the husky approval of Mrs. Ford. But since she made us feel so much a part of the action, playing an important part under the white hot light, it all seemed worth it. More often than not, I would end up selling the most bags and go home late, exhausted and dripping wet, to drop my hot head on a cool pillow.

In the course of the evening I made my way through C.M.T.C. Camp with bunks lined up in tent after tent, the men in all the disarray of undress, and all the attendant smells of massed masculine living. Under bug-studded lights I felt the whiplash of their earthy speech, most of which I was hearing for the first time. As in Michelangelo's cartoon, which F. T. Prince evokes in his poem "Soldiers Bathing," I was watching young warriors who had laid aside their armor:

> I remember how he showed
> Their muscular limbs that clamber from the water
> And heads that turn across the shoulder, eager for the slaughter,
> Forgetful of their bodies that are bare
> And hot to buckle on and use the weapons lying there.[1]

But these were not soldiers breaking off from "some sortie of the enemy" but youths playing with the weapons that they would later learn to use in dead seriousness. Many of those frolicking there under the showers like boys at a swimming hole or stretched out on their bunks were destined to die in World War II. The field, where then they were preparing to attend a boxing match, would one day contain their graves, as the Jefferson Barracks Cemetery moved ever westward from the river to accommodate newly arrived veterans. . . .

[1] *Collected Poems*, New York, 1979.

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BREAKING OUT

My brief but brutal encounters with women got all mixed up in my mind with my imaginary encounters, which were more protracted and more satisfactory, and the two became hopelessly confused. Like every adolescent I was living on an edge between dream and reality and sometimes I sank into what was pure nightmare. The picture show had been for some time, along with prize fights and basketball matches, our sole recreation on the garrison. Under the Arabian shawl given to my mother by the wife of Colonel England, we had traded pictures of our movie stars—Blanche Sweet, Dolores Del Rio, Bebe Daniels, Billie Dove—and we learned where to send away for others. During my high school years a new Post Theater had been built beside the Hospital, and on summer evenings my brother and I would put on our white duck trousers and walk off through the woods to the picture show. Usually we had canteen checks, which my father had won or collected in exchange for drinks, to cover the entrance fee, but there were times when we did not. We discovered that the window to the toilet on the side of the building was always left open, and since it was at ground level we could just hoist our legs over the window ledge and climb in. We would wait until the picture began, and in the darkness find a seat with our friends — a good proportion of the audience was young people. It did not seem at all inappropriate to us that our entrance to paradise should be through a place of excrement.

It was in the woods that I composed my own daydreams and where, in a sense, I made my own films. I would start off on a summer day with a bucket to gather blackberries, which were plentiful, and in every thicket I would meet my dream girls. In my imagination I lay with them on the wet edges of the creeks, returning in the evening utterly exhausted but satisfied. I was beginning to read of nymphs, and I was certain that they existed even on the edge of Missouri sinkholes, although there they were more likely to take the form of Indian maidens on moccasined feet, half-clothed in what seemed to be Arabian shawls.

I was living on an edge dividing dream and reality, and I was living also on an edge dividing military and civilian life. This narrow division appeared to me to be symbolized by the doors that divided my front upstairs study room from the men who sat below in

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the dining room drinking my father's bootleg home brew and whiskey. In a house next to the north gate of the Barracks, we had entered what my father called "the bootleg business" after moving off the post in the 1930s. The stairway came right into the front room upstairs where I studied, and the only bathroom in the house was immediately to the right as you climbed the stairs. To form a sort of shield so that the drinkers could go upstairs to the bathroom without entering the room, my father had put together a whole series of doors, one alongside the other, making a little hallway, with a real doorway at the end that opened into the room. The doors came only halfway up the wall and consequently did not keep out any noise. I hated the lot of them, and when I heard some drunken soldier struggling up the stairs, I half hoped that the doors would all fold quickly together and collapse on him. These doors began to represent the unstable partition dividing me from the vulgar aspects of military life.

On my side of the partition I had my books and my typewriter, which my mother had found somewhere, probably at Klebs Pawnshop. At this shop at the end of the Broadway carline the men from the Barracks hocked their clothes on payday, and I made regular trips there with my mother to buy the suits I wore to school. The typewriter was an early model with the keys in the round. It did not work very well, but on it I managed to type out my first poems. It gave them another whole dimension; they seemed already in print as I read them over and over. One of them had actually been in print. My French teacher, Miss Edith Babbitt, who wrote verse, urged me to send some poems to a little magazine to which she had contributed, *Versecraft*, published in Atlanta. "Observatory" contrasted the vast serene heavens with the tight, restricted human world below and concluded

> Let them squeeze my soul with walls,
> And tear my heart with iron bars;
> But do not let them take the hole,
> Oh God, through which I see the stars.

I was not quite so cut off as the poem indicates. We had recently acquired a radio, an ugly brown one, the color of molasses and shaped like a tea cozy. I would steal down occasionally away from

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my homework and hunch over it to listen to the comedy routines of Burns and Allen, while the noisy talk of the drinkers continued in the dining room.

I was now ambivalent in my feelings toward the Army. I was drawn constantly to Jefferson Barracks since it was the one world that I had always known, and to break away from it would not be easy; all my friends were there. When I acquired a bicycle, I would sometimes pedal up to the Carondelet Library near Blow School to take out books. I managed to get a library card for my mother, and I went into the adult section to fetch books for her, books that I always also read myself. But more often, immediately on arrival from school, I would cycle off to the Barracks. . . .

THE BIVOUAC OF THE DEAD

On a rainy day in November of 1977 I returned to Jefferson Barracks. I found my way to South Broadway, up and down which I had traveled so many times in a yellow clanging streetcar, watching, between the old brick buildings, the muddy river flowing a few blocks away. Now stretching along the river from downtown St. Louis to Lemay and the beginnings of Jefferson Barracks was a huge industrial complex, one plant after another. With their array of chimneys, white metal tubes, and tanks, the plants resembled the gloved hands of automatons reaching up into the sky and out over the water. . . .

At the far end of what had been the Western Front, I parked across from the entrance to the Cemetery. The stone gates, emblazoned with a large black eagle and bearing in solid black the letters U.S. NATIONAL CEMETERY, stood exactly where the K.C. Building, my first residence in the Barracks, had been. In the wooded area to the right of the gate, I watched as a yellow bulldozer tore up the ground, making way for more graves. The Cemetery was now the second largest military cemetery in the nation, and it would go on expanding until it covered all the remaining wooded land of what had once been Jefferson Barracks.

I got out of my car and took a few steps, looking neither right nor left but rather down at my feet. The only familiar thing was the sidewalk on which I was standing, and I started down it as I had many times long ago. I examined every bit of it, carefully stepping over the cracks as I had as a boy. Two-thirds of the way

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down, at a point where the last cantonment building had stood and where the bayonet course had begun, the sidewalk stopped abruptly, its final section tilted up in the air by the roots of a maple tree. I looked up and across the street, now known as Memorial Drive: there as far as I could see stretched the white crosses of the graves. . . .

I walked back to my car and drove out of the park, through the West Gate of the Barracks, and onto Telegraph Road. It was getting dark as I looped back eastward and soon crossed the Mississippi to the broad farmland of southern Illinois, which had sent so many of the men I had known in the twenties and thirties to Jefferson Barracks, many of whom now rested there within their graves.

As I drove on into the dark, I felt the long, bony hand from that bivouac of the dead reaching into the night and heard the sound of taps ringing in my ears. Where indeed was the grandeur of the military condition, of which the poet Alfred de Vigny had spoken? Was that condition ever anything but the pure servitude, of which he had also spoken? What, I asked myself, was the point of the deaths of so many men and women in so many wars, just or unjust, if we now made war on the earth itself and befouled its beauty that had so benefitted us? Was our modern Army, more and more mechanized, more and more inhuman, meant only to carry a message of destruction farther and farther across the earth and on into space? Had I returned to the scenes of my boyhood only to gaze upon the emblematic presentation of this final desecration?

It was dark now and my headlights cut through wisps of fog; I might have been in the middle of nowhere. I realized suddenly that I was not far from another much older graveyard that I had visited the day before. This was at Cahokia, Illinois, directly across from St. Louis, where, within a few miles of the shining Saarinen arch, on the edge of the highway, surrounded by block after block of honky-tonks and shabby buildings, lies a bit of park enclosing the most remarkable Indian burial mounds in the United States. On this site, at the junction of rivers in what is known as the American Bottomlands, archaeological excavations have recently established that there flourished between 900 and 1300 A.D. an important community of some 30,000 people in the midst of the wilderness (no bigger city existed on the North American continent until Philadelphia grew to that size in 1800). This community had extensive and important trading connections with a third of the

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continent. In its heyday it covered six and a half square miles and had more than one hundred mounds, the highest of which, the largest such structure in the United States, is a hundred feet high, covers sixteen acres, and contains about 22 million cubic feet of earth. While similar to the ziggurats of Babylon and the pyramids of the Incas, these mounds were entirely the work of North American Indians. Why the community disappeared is not known. In some of the graves that the mounds contain have been discovered copper, mica, conch-shell beads, and arrowheads, all indicative of an affluent society, along with the rounded stones used in a gambling game that was still being played by Choctaw Indians in the mid-nineteenth century. While I had been brought up on an Army garrison founded as an outpost in the Indian Wars, I knew that, on my mother's side, I had Choctaw forebears on the outside and in the enemy camp, forebears who had perhaps gambled with those same rounded stones.

In my mind's eye as I drove on, I pictured a scene that is supposed to have taken place here regularly in prehistoric times. Late in July at dawn the paramount chief of the tribe, representing the Great Sun in a cape of shell beads and a high crown of feathers, kneels to greet the sun at the top of the pyramid. A cry goes up from the crowd of thousands in the forty-acre square below, as a tattooed warrior, face painted red, carries in a bowl the red-hot embers of the eternal fire that is kept burning in the inner temple antechamber of the pyramid. The warrior slowly descends and empties the bowl in the center of the plaza into a pile of leaves and branches at the heart of a cross made of logs pointed in the four cardinal directions. Flames leap up from the cross, a fresh fire annually renewed for the harvest festival, brought down from the heavens, a gift of the sun itself.

Now returning to these American Bottomlands, to the scenes of my boyhood, the heart of my country and the depth of myself, I felt that I had somehow been touched by that ancient fire. It was perhaps to attempt to rekindle it and distill a bit of the land's original essence that I had come back. In learning about my own life and its origins, I had learned something of the nature of conquest, of the conquering and the conquered, and of the land that conquers all. That knowledge and the thought that I might be but the smallest part of a great mysterious whole filled me with a strange joy as I moved on into the night, on toward the east from which I had come.

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ALFRED CORN

The Outdoor Amphitheater

Those first scenes, lapidary, paintbox bright:
The climb down, half circle
By concentric half circle, opening
On to wherever the beginning is—.
The mists lift, run before the sun,
Retreat, and shrink into the trees.
Now, it's the public park;
And I am standing by myself, inside
The amphitheater.
Picture a grassy stage on a low rise, opposite some
Old wooden bleachers stained leaf-green—
But when I begin to see them,
(Somewhere between ages six and fourteen),
Already weathered to a pale olive.
'52? '53? Memory's hide-and-seek.
Around then, the days you saw little girls
Dressed like dolls—hairribbons, pinafores trimmed
In rose-red rickrack—and boys wearing navy shorts
Held up by suspenders, in warm weather
(Which came early that far south), Easters or
Summer afternoons, when people, whole families,
Their friends and distant relatives,
Went to the outdoor amphitheater.

The idea hard to get in focus is not how things
Looked but how the look felt, then—and then, now.
That grassy cradle had the appeal, first,
Of its agreeable siting and landscaping:
A fresh green plot enclosed by ranks of trees;
Sometimes a few clouds floating overhead
(Compare with the vague "idea" mentioned above).
Oyster-gray clouds, April week-ends;
But then, almost always the ceiling broke
Up into sunlight later in the day—
A fine-screened, copper-gold afternoon sun,

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Which stayed bright till nearly everybody
Had gone home, leaving the picnic debris,
All the plates and cups—paper but surprisingly
Functional—the ice-cream sticks and mimeo programs. This
Then had to be collected and carted away
By an old man who used a—did it have a name?
A sort of stabbing stick; a stabber. He never attacked
The litter with much enthusiasm
Or worked longer than, if that, half an hour.
So, there I am, sitting on the lowest,
Most splintered rung of the bleachers,
Talking to him the while.
I might be bubbling down (no straw needed) a 7-Up,
The process punctuated now and then
By a burp of sweet, eye-closing tear-gas.

Did he see the show, or hear the choir? No,
Never cared to. His job was just to tidy up.
Soon's that was done he could get home.
Which was where *I* ought to be. What was I doing
Hanging around here by myself anyway, say?
But I say nothing. A white wad
Goes to his brow, wrinkled and dark-shining. . . .
And then he fades away, gets dim and sepia
And lost. And the page turns to something else,
The dancing, music, speeches, and the plays.

The plays. What didn't we see—remember *Our Town*?
Yes, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream,*
Staged on Midsummer's Day. (And there
May have been—a little late for May Day—a May
Pole Dance, as a curtain-raiser.)
The Hermia, blonde, pretty, and
The Demetrius decided to pair off that summer;
Working together on the play had settled it.
He was the captain of the track team; she—
Nothing special, but interested in Dramatics.
As actors, no great shakes, but with
Nature backing up the magical lines,
They played at least the love scenes perfectly.
(Later they married and moved out of state.)

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I wish there were some way to prove, now, that
They went back, the night of the performance,
To the amphitheater; kissed, stifled laughter,
Waiting darkly invisible till the moon rose. . . .
Does soft, silver light dissolve a danger,
And bring them safely through this? Suppose someone out
Of work, and looking for it, some mugger, came up—
What then? But in the early '50s that
Was unheard of, unthinkable.
Which they knew or rather just assumed. (Half the fun
Was a fine carelessness—wouldn't the play always
End with Titania firmly enthroned again?)

"Small" and "painful": how the two can be felt as one
Thing welded together. He grows taller
And stronger, trying to force apart the tandem;
And one bright morning is graduated.
Every June, Commencement Exercises
For the high-school, weather permitting, were
Held outdoors in the amphitheater.
Ours finally, my class's turn!
We sat there hot and damp in the heavy
Black humanist garb, with those absurd mortarboards
And trembling tassels. Ludicrous; and all the more
If you happened to sport grim, black-rimmed specs
Like those that had devolved on me
During the long assault on Knowledge. And my spoils?
The Valedictory, an address spoken at the end
Of our ceremony. A one-off and no doubt pointless
Performance, which I sweated over weeks
Beforehand, writing, crumpling up, writing. . . .
I must find something that would harmonize
A sense of farewell with aspirations toward the future.
No undertaking for the fainthearted;
But then, the members of my family
Had never appreciably lacked conviction;
Nor was this the first time I had been magnified
Within the hot focal point of audience attention.

No, my first stage appearance came much earlier—
Brief, and, to judge by the response,

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A flop. Where my teacher got the notion
That an eight-year old, even with a clear,
True alto, accurate and on pitch, could
Put over two high-toned songs, one religious, one
Patriotic, please tell me. Earnestly performed;
Politely received. That was the interpreter's
Vocation, then, its own reward?
I did think I'd given a good account
Of my songs, myself: let that be *enough*. And yet,
I wouldn't, plausibly, have scorned
Instant acclaim had it been forthcoming.
I took my seat while the applause thinned out
And the next performer sallied up to the mike.
Through puzzlement and flooding eyes
I could see only—green. Leaves and branches
Like flotsam downstream the rushing immense
River of sky. And then, nothing.

Those days, mostly I was the spectator,
Taking it all in. Taking, but also giving:
For the true audiences would work hand in hand
With the performer, their puppet, "pulling for him";
Who must in turn put half, the more vigilant half
Of his mind second-row center—
A benign, inventive form of self-appraisal.
(And a strenuous task. Can there be some
Who *only* want to perform, and never to watch?)
Not that such issues preoccupied me back then;
I simply lived their force, avid to share
In the alchemy, the uncanny teamwork of stagecraft.
Example: that student circus
From a small university in Florida—
That stands out. Those demented and inspiring acts!
Jugglers, tumblers, clowns, daredevil tightrope artists
Who danced on high, to appearances unaware that one
False move meant curtains for the pitiful, broken
Star, flattened and paralyzed on the grass.
No, it was only the fun they felt, or seemed to.
As for the garish costumes, the tinsel, plumage,
And rhinestones—not to let them be transformed
By mental footlights into an orient richness:

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It would have been cloddish, a betrayal
Of the all-expansive theatrical spirit.
Go along or not with the enchantment? Ours to choose.
Nearly everybody preferred, as I remember,
To be pleased; banged their palms together and went home
With aerial feats spinning in the brain, magic
Tableaux, and how many zany escapades to dream on—
The lesson borne in indelibly that,
Should a number come a cropper, complete fiasco
Can often be subverted by a skillful clown.

Other thrills: there was that chorus, visiting from—
Outer space, it's tempting to think.
The Wagner Chorale, was it? Anyway,
Two hundred voices' unearthly precision in
Modernized but ravishing renditions
Of Orlando di Lasso, Handel, Bach;
Bliss. And then, art versions of folk tunes, black
And white, both belted out with crack syncopation
And pressurized swells, some dynamite sforzandi
That might have brought the rafters down,
But as it was, settled for five-part lightning bolts
("What You Going To Do When the World's On Fire?")
Flung upward to the firmament among lofty
Cumulus clouds and ramps of golden sun.
For the young, latest convert to harmony, it
Was much as if a wingèd envoy with beetled brows stared
From the recruiting poster, index aimed straight on,
Above the caption: "The Angelic Host Needs You!"
Well, volunteers beat the draft—in block print, I signed.

What else? Oh yes, some traveling entertainers,
A vaudeville, with hoofers and comedians, called
THE FAMOUS . . . somebodies.
I do remember they arranged to have the name
Of the revue, in big, separate, bright
Red letters, put out in front of the stage.
I had come early, to watch them, racing
Around in frantic sweat, set up.
Say there, would I give them a hand?
THE FAMOUS letters—if I would just move

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Them, in order, out front. You bet!
But, in the thick of the task, an idea,
A silly one, took possession of me:
To think of myself as the letter "I," and then
Link up with some of the consonants (just
About my height), to see what I could spell.
The result? Telegraphic chips,
Necessarily; but here's a sentence
I remember liking and repeating aloud:
IF IM IT IT IS I.
(Ending up a unit again, as it
Had to have been.) "Places," they called,
Waving me to my seat, all further assistance
Snared on the jazzy opening line of the saxophone.

The show itself was certifiably funny,
Even though the big-city, for-the-birds
Wisecracks went winging over my head.
This much was plain: some day I must
Get to the bottom of them. On the spot—
Well lighted within it—plans began to be laid.

Just because it's at the other end of the scale,
I'll bring up here another gathering—
The revival meeting, a regular feature
Of our summers. The one I single out,
Not unusual for the fervor it bred in us
(This was John Wesley country, after all),
Sticks in my mind because of the sincerity,
Youth, and out-of-the-ordinary handsomeness
Of the preacher. "Almost Persuaded," ran the hymn,
But, in truth, we were altogether persuaded, won
Over to guilt and salvation, washed clean
By the blood and weeping our own real tears.
Time has dried them. But not the memory
Of his fiery sermon on the coming apocalypse.
Who didn't recognize the crushing likelihood
Of what he proclaimed? The Time Was At Hand.
Not one of us but had heard Gabriel
Heatter on the radio warm to the subject
Of Korea, the Red Menace, the Domino

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Theory. . . . Those veterans listening
Who'd had their combat baptism in the Pacific
Theater paused to reflect on total war, the Atom
Bomb, Asian fanaticism, kamikazes,
And Communism. We'd do well to look ahead.
First, lay down stores in the basement—canned goods,
Water, ammunition; but more important still,
Get ready to meet our Maker.
The worry hovering over me always was
My reluctance to greet Millennium.
Must the world *burn* to bring the Kingdom in?
An event all too easy to picture,
Blending, indeed, bleeding into what I
Had already gleaned here and there about the eternal
Brimstone climate of Hell, where the world kept
On horribly ending in never-ending flame.
Sitting there on the grained wood bleachers, hot,
Mosquito-tormented, my eyes transfixed by his
Ardent, sweating face, suddenly I knew
How it would come to pass: His hand would strike,
The night sky turn supernova, sun-white
Beams transfigure all below, as atom after atom
Gave up the fiction of matter, form, the fallen
Rain of vindictive fire tipping earth, houses, trees,
Dominos over into the flowing unspeakable
Flamebows of fission tided to whatever stars
Had escaped the earthly and solar catastrophe: this
Would be the millennium, when the Kingdom came.

So, when the preacher made his pitch, when he
Numbered our errors and omissions, we listened;
Choked back emotion, repented; believed.
That the knowledge could be sustained, renewed,
Become the seed of marked and saving change
Was the illusion. That, for one, the wife—in pain,
Outdone—might at some point lean up on an elbow
To say it wasn't working out, and could they talk?
That the husband who felt trapped in his job, his house,
Might at last try to come to terms, withdraw,
And make a new beginning. That
The child who couldn't get himself across

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To those arbitrary figureheads fearfully in charge
Might find a way this time.
No, it never quite sticks. The feeling holds a day,
A week, then becomes a memory, and then—.
By the time the schoolhouse doors swing
Open in the fall, everything's back to normal.

Migrating bird summerbound for the Gulf
And South America, a late autumn passage
Low over the park in midafternoon
Spreads wide the mapped, down-on view of open
Space, brown grass across whose expanse
The tiny figure walks his diagonal,
An everlasting newcomer's minute progress
No moment in your fleet, watch-jewel eye. . . .
Not this, but some unwritten score
Of high and low in the green cabinet
A child takes for his serious playhouse,
Ground bass of pain whelmed over in a free-for-all
Of whisper, hue, scent, savor, grain,
Composed, the slow length of a homeward mile,
My study. November: never a hint of snow,
But downcast leaves, temperatures, cold trek
Through the dark house, bare ruin of a theater
On my way—those signs told that the solstice
Previews, under whose direction, would now begin.
Was winter's gift to simplify, cut back, unravel thread
By thread the tissue of what summer knew?
Openings and closings and openings. . . .
Now perhaps, but could I then condemn the wish to mount up,
Up past the holding patterns and wingborne flight to a stage,
A new year, fruit and flower dancing together
In breezes outside any fixed global compass?
If the boy could stay, and stay dissatisfaction,
Each step not draw him farther on,
Always back to his own small room,
The creaking furniture, lessons,
Chores, his present, and his distant future;
If the cloud ceiling could break, and he be
Gathered in—. But the time isn't at hand.

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Stock still, he waves upward, goodby, goodby;
Lets the hand drop; looks around him. And what
Does the player do in an empty theater?
Almost empty. But see, the neighbor dog
Comes sidling up with barks and wags; then stops,
Takes a position; and
Leaves behind a reminder that we are
Earthly clay. On which, to heart's content, dwell
Those who will, those who can.

One blue-and-gold April my older sister was
Crowned Queen of the Beauty Pageant.
All over the park early-flowering
Dogwoods hovered against the shaded green background
Like new galaxies in hushed explosion.
My sister wore a ball-gown, the pastel satin
Odd but touching, there, out of doors. She laughed
And sobbed energetically while, with equal energy,
The MC squared his shoulders under a rented
White jacket, coughed into his fist and thrust
A sheaf of red roses and carnations
Into her arms. Sweet, familial pride
Flooded through me; and, besides, people said
We looked so much alike. . . . So, the Pageant
Concluded, last applause subsiding, all
The friends and relations rose, nodded and greeted
Each other, handshakes and kisses bestowed crisscross
Around, signs of a shared contentment that
One of the community had been recognized
As beautiful, the youthful sovereign of Spring. . . .
These were habits, too, of seasoned husbandry; for,
Since that good held in common never flourishes
Without the single, uncommon effort—
However dreamborne and momentary seeming—
Palms and applause must come down handsomely;
Gifts and promise of every kind be acknowledged,
Take the platform and stand firm under the weighty
Crown, knowing its meaning: that the assembled will
A continuance; that this stage not be the last;
And that the performance move on from strength to strength.

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DAVID BROMWICH

Emerson's Ode to W. H. Channing

> it is not the plunder,
> but 'accessibility to experience'
> —Marianne Moore

EMERSON WROTE SUCCESSFUL POEMS of at least three kinds. The most familiar is the Concord Poem, or sociable ramble. Here he is often charming, and much closer to the style of his time and place than he lets himself appear elsewhere, in either verse or prose. In a very different mode, the Wordsworthian elegy or meditation, he writes with enough ease to rival Bryant, but with a power of invention that makes us want to ignore all other claims and think of him as the first American poet. Finally, Emerson is himself a pioneer of the sort of poem he calls for in "Merlin," the shocker or far-fetcher, the prophetic blast that we hear as the "strokes of fate," and see as "Sparks of the supersolar blaze." These classifications turn out to be a hindrance in reading, however, because so few of the poems are willing to stay put and respect the boundaries. "Monadnoc" is a ramble that leaps into prophecy, and then tip-toes back; "Bacchus" is an elegy, modeled on the Immortality Ode, which opens up an apocalyptic prophecy of renewal; "The Snow-Storm" is a *Wordsworthian* ramble. The only point of beginning like this is to warn ourselves against inferring much about Emerson's poetry from the discussion of a single poem: with him, even more than with most poets, any conclusion drawn about his "characteristic" tone or strategy is pretty certainly going to be false. In the following remarks on the "Ode Inscribed to W. H. Channing," I assume only that it is an unsettling poem which we have not yet begun to make our peace with, and that Emerson would have placed it with "Uriel" as the most serious of his prophecies.

Here is the poem.

> Though loath to grieve
> The evil time's sole patriot,

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I cannot leave
My honied thought
For the priest's cant,
Or statesman's rant.

If I refuse
My study for their politique,
Which at the best is trick,
The angry Muse
Puts confusion in my brain.

But who is he that prates
Of the culture of mankind,
Of better arts and life?
Go, blindworm, go,
Behold the famous States
Harrying Mexico
With rifle and with knife!

Or who, with accent bolder,
Dare praise the freedom-loving mountaineer?
I found by thee, O rushing Contoocook!
And in thy valleys, Agiochook!
The jackals of the negro-holder.

The God who made New Hampshire
Taunted the lofty land
With little men;—
Small bat and wren
House in the oak:—
If earth-fire cleave
The upheaved land, and bury the folk,
The southern crocodile would grieve.
Virtue palters; Right is hence;
Freedom praised, but hid;
Funeral eloquence
Rattles the coffin-lid.

What boots thy zeal,
O glowing friend,
That would indignant rend

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The northland from the south?
Wherefore? to what good end?
Boston Bay and Bunker Hill
Would serve things still;
Things are of the snake.

The horseman serves the horse,
The neatherd serves the neat,
The merchant serves the purse,
The eater serves his meat;
'Tis the day of the chattel,
Web to weave, and corn to grind;
Things are in the saddle,
And ride mankind.

There are two laws discrete,
Not reconciled,—
Law for man, and law for thing;
The last builds town and fleet,
But it runs wild,
And doth the man unking.

'Tis fit the forest fall,
The steep be graded,
The mountain tunnelled,
The sand shaded,
The orchard planted,
The glebe tilled,
The prairie granted,
The steamer built.

Let man serve law for man;
Live for friendship, live for love,
For truth's and harmony's behoof;
The state may follow how it can,
As Olympus follows Jove.

Yet do not I implore
The wrinkled shopman to my sounding woods,
Nor bid the unwilling senator
Ask votes of thrushes in the solitudes.

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Every one to his chosen work;—
Foolish hands may mix and mar;
Wise and sure the issues are.
Round they roll till dark is light,
Sex to sex, and even to odd;—
The over-god
Who marries Right to Might,
Who peoples, unpeoples,—
He who exterminates
Races by stronger races,
Black by white faces,—
Knows to bring honey
Out of the lion;
Grafts gentlest scion
On pirate and Turk.

The Cossack eats Poland,
Like stolen fruit;
Her last noble is ruined,
Her last poet mute:
Straight, into double band
The victors divide;
Half for freedom strike and stand;—
The astonished Muse finds thousands at her side.

We know enough about Concord in the 1840s to reconstruct the occasion of this poem. Through much of 1845 and 1846, Emerson was working against the odds to find strength in solitude, while Texas was annexed, the war of persuasion between the slave and free states grew heated, and America embarked on its imperial war against Mexico. Thoreau went to jail rather than pay taxes for the war, and Channing, in league with other neighbors or friends, sought to extract from Emerson some comparable gesture of public defiance. It would be wrong to view Channing and Emerson as natural allies. Channing was convinced that all progress must come from unified movements; he had objected to Emerson's thinking as early as the Divinity School *Address*: "You deny the Human Race. You stand, or rather seek to stand, a complete Adam. But you cannot do it." In the background of the Ode we thus have three temperaments, each occupying a distinct position:

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Channing, the man of great public causes, who denounces the war on principle; Thoreau, the disciple of self-reliance, who resists the war as an invasion of his privacy; and Emerson, who so far has taken no public stand, though from time to time he confides in his journal.

Emerson's conduct during this crisis would have been a familiar story to anyone who knew him well. His pattern generally was to withhold himself from the fray until the last possible moment, when the force of a calamity became unendurable. Then, at the beckoning of others, he would make his statement. Once he had played the part, he would confess to a sense of having been besmirched, or somehow cheated of himself, in the course of making his eloquence serviceable to a cause. When, for example, President Van Buren's sham-treaty with the Cherokees first contracted for the exchange of all Cherokee lands and the transportation of the entire tribe beyond the Mississippi River, Emerson's friends prevailed on him to write an open letter of protest to Van Buren. It is an eloquent but also a curiously personal document, in which a long stream of interrogatives is suddenly closed tight: "a crime is projected that confounds our understandings by its magnitude—a crime that really deprives us as well as the Cherokees of a country." With this letter Emerson satisfied the cause while speaking not as the agent of a cause but as a private citizen. Yet after writing it, he says in his journal that on all such occasions, "my genius deserts me"—and he adds, "It is like dead cats around my neck."

We now come to a moment eight years later, with nothing changed in Emerson. Once again, the question he has to ask himself is, How, given my purity of self-reliance, can I ever ally myself with the common sentiments of men, and not feel besmirched by having consummated the alliance in public? The Ode shows us what it looks like when he tries to meet the question head-on. The poem is a very mixed success, in an area where Emerson's ideas seem to have ruled out any kind of success whatever; but it is an important poem to the American imagination, for reasons that have nothing to do with our search for masterpieces. To explain its importance we need to return to three of Emerson's favorite words: *commodity, spirit,* and *power.*

The Ode exhibits a cleavage that Emerson had often sought to deny or repair, between commodity and spirit; and it impresses us more strongly than ever with his tendency to mistake them for each other, especially when they were joined by the pivotal third

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term, *power*. We are conscious of power in our sovereignty over the realm of commodity and our liberty in the realm of spirit. As we discover in *Nature*, commodity has a very low place on the Emersonian scale of being, and spirit the highest place. Since, however, it is power that gives us access to both realms, the two can look dangerously alike. Because they can, and because we find the resemblance attractive, we risk forgetting our end in the infatuation with our means: we become sovereigns of commodity and call it spirit. The Ode, I think, exemplifies this confusion but does not surmount it; and my conclusion, which I will try to keep in sight as I proceed, is that there can be no convincing resolution of the quarrel between Emerson's scholarly interpreter, Henry Thoreau, and his national interpreter, Henry Ford. Both tell us what they mean, and in both cases the name of what they mean is Emerson.

The journal entries around the time of the Ode are haunted by the evils a nation can do, and adroit in baffling their impulse to condemn with a nervous suspicion of all motives. "Mr. Webster," writes Emerson, "told [us] how much the war cost, that was his protest, but he voted the war, and sends his son to it. They calculated rightly on Mr. Webster. My friend Mr. Thoreau has gone to jail rather than pay his tax. On him they could not calculate. The Abolitionists denounce the war and give much time to it, but they pay the tax." Webster's position is wrong, and yet Thoreau's protest—with its incidental reward of allowing him to be seen as an incalculable—is too idiocyncratic to be repeated or bear consequences. On the other hand, the very brazenness of the American government testifies to its strength of will, which almost looks like *self*-will, and compels us to recognize its power, which part of us wants to admire. "These—rabble—at Washington are really better than the snivelling opposition. They have a sort of genius of a bold and manly cast, though Satanic."

In another entry of roughly the same period, the calculability of the abolitionists has ceased to be a warrant for rejecting their cause, and we find Emerson oppressed by the weight of soul-sickening events. He admits to himself that his only reason for keeping silent is the still greater oppression that would come if he allowed his anger to settle on an easy target. "Really," he writes, "a scholar has too humble an opinion of the population, of their possibilities, of their future, to be entitled to go to war with them, as with equals. This prison is but a step to suicide. He knows that nothing they can do will ever please him. Why should he poorly pound on

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some one string of discord, when all is jangle?" These are the words of a man whose temperament will permit him neither to pursue his calling in spite of public events nor to join the crowd that tries to effect a change in them. From the jail, suicide is but a step away; but one feels that for Emerson, as he writes, total paralysis is but a step in the opposite direction: few passages in his journals have this one-tone grimness. And, after this, we find it impossible to believe that Emerson could credit, or long be happy with, his remark that "The annexation of Texas looks like one of those events which retard or retrograde the civilization of ages. But the World Spirit is a good swimmer, and storms and waves cannot easily drown him. He snaps his fingers at laws."

I have quoted these three entries out of sequence because, in their present order, they reproduce the movement of the Ode. We begin with the disagreeable summoning to public speech, the refusal to supply eloquence for the occasion, and the rather anxious speculation on the motives of others who do speak. There follows the survey of America's estate, with the admission that evil *is* abroad in the land, but an evil that has come to dominate nature itself, to the point where all action is equally useless and equally blameless. Finally, about-face; the World Spirit is a good swimmer. The end of the poem is made inevitable not by a master-stroke of dialectical cunning, or because Emerson has convinced even himself of its propriety. It has only the claim of necessity. There was nothing else for Emerson to do if he wanted to go on writing.

Emerson speaks the first two stanzas, and Channing—or whatever in Emerson is embarrassable by Channing—the next three. Emerson gets pretty much the rest of the poem, his mind ranging far and wide to produce new contradictions while his stomach labors hard to digest the old. At the outset Emerson wants only to defend the solitude a poet builds so that poetry will visit him; abridge your solitude at the urging of society, and the "angry Muse" puts confusion in your brain. This would seem to require no apology. But in the third, fourth, and fifth stanzas Channing quickly gets the better of it: "While you preen yourself with fine talk about culture, one of your hapless neighbors is being assaulted in a back-alley of the Republic." And the pollution of slavery covers everything: "I found by thee, O rushing Contoocook!/ And in thy valleys, Agiochook!/ The jackals of the negro-holder." We have expected a different climax—something more like, "I found by thee . . . / The flower that grows no other-where." Emerson

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loves these place-names; they belong to his New England, and mean as much to him as Monadnoc, or the troop of colonists in a famous opening line: "Bulkeley, Hunt, Willard, Homer, Meriam, Flint." The jackals are not here yet; but you can smell them in the air, the Fugitive Slave Law is on its way; and this is a betrayal of the intransigence that the very names were meant to convey. In the fifth stanza New Hampshire's men are seen as unworthy of the sublime landscape they inhabit: they are full of ambition, mean egotism, and complicity, and the land towers over them in gigantic scorn.

Yet, as this stanza continues, something strange is happening to the logic of the poem. A specific revulsion from those who would countenance slavery is generalized into universal disenchantment. The saber-rattling of the abolitionists is really just coffin-rattling; in such a time all eloquence becomes merely funereal. Channing's argument has touched an extreme at which it plays into Emerson's hands. The mode of much of the fifth stanza—beginning with "Small bat and wren/ House in the Oak"—is close to Blakean satire, and we see that political remedies of the usual sort are out of the question. "Things are of the snake." Therefore, render unto Caesar what is Caesar's; and while you do it there will be plenty of time for debate.

The debate that occupies the rest of the poem ought to interest students of American politics as much as students of Emerson. *Service* has been on Emerson's mind from the start: whether or not to be pressed into service for a cause, whether to say his "I will not serve" to Channing or the rabble in Washington. Now he observes that the right disposition of service has been inverted throughout nature: the horseman serves the horse, the eater serves his meat, "Things are in the saddle,/ And ride mankind." This happens because, of the "two laws discrete," "Law for man and law for thing," the second runs wild and "Doth the man unking." When I first read the Ode and came to the ninth stanza, I took it to be straight irony, a demonstration of how law for thing runs wild. But after all, *it is we that feel the irony*. What Emerson knew was that he needed two stanzas; one each, to demonstrate the proper functioning of law for thing and law for man. And law for thing includes: cutting down forests, building steamers, annexing new lands. Emerson is writing this poem to attack at the root the man-thing confusion that has tricked us into war. Yet the perfected man that he envisions has agreed neither to leave things alone nor to serve

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law for man. On the contrary, the march of technological optimism brings us back where we began, at the annexation of Texas, and determines it to have been legal in a more than political sense. We can see what the trouble is. Down this path a little way, things get in the saddle, and we are in Mexico with the rifle and the knife.

For "thing" let us temporarily substitute "commodity." Emerson writes in *Nature:*

> Under the general name of commodity, I rank all those advantages which our senses owe to nature. . . . [But] Nature, in its ministry to man, is not only the material but is also the process and the result. All the parts incessantly work into each other's hands for the profit of man . . . . The useful arts are reproductions or new combinations by the wit of man, of the same natural benefactors. He no longer waits for favoring gales, but by means of steam, he realizes the fable of Aeolus's bag, and carries the two and thirty winds in the boiler of the boat.

Commodity thus includes both the thing and what man does to the thing—which is understood as part of the thing itself, its final cause. In *Nature* as in the Ode, we can gauge Emerson's high spirits by the catalogue of things which he regards as a wonder requiring no comment. And yet the chapter in *Nature* closes with an admonition: "this mercenary benefit [conferred by nature with the help of man's skill] is one which has respect to a farther good. A man is fed, not that he may be fed, but that he may work." And if we are set to work on deeper tunnels and vaster prairies—what then? Work, after all, implies self-reliance only for a scholar.

The truth is that Emerson had a lover's quarrel with commodity, and liked to speak of its advancement in the language of manifest destiny. His journals portray it as an energy-giver to man, who may require coaxing to unleash his genius; and as the maker of harmony in those vicissitudes where man can hear only jangle. "By atoms, by trifles, by sots, Heaven operates. The needles are nothing, the magnetism all." This is simple enough, as one instance of a monism that Emerson never leaves unqualified for long. (But the needles, I suspect, are the lives of individual men.) More amusing, and a good deal more puzzling, is the entry that runs: "Alcott should be made effective by being tapped by a good suction pump." Here Alcott is to be understood as either inflated, or constipated, or both. The suction-pump will make his genius serviceable. But something else is happening too. The machine is turning Alcott into a *thing*, and Emerson is expressing a certain satisfac-

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tion in the fact. It is fitting. The machine was made to do this to Alcott, and he needed to have this done to him. Which is in the saddle?

For "man" let us now substitute "spirit." (Of this, Emerson tells us, those who know most will speak least. I will try to say very little.) Again, in the relevant chapter of *Nature*, we discover an admonition: "you cannot freely admire a noble landscape if laborers are digging in the field hard by." In the sight of bare commodity you do not participate in spirit. But what of a large mountain with a tunnel through it, when the laborers have gone away? If commodity may be assimilated to nature as the steamboat to Aeolus, the mountain-with-tunnel can plausibly become one of the hieroglyphs we read in identifying ourselves with spirit, and the power we feel in contemplating it is not to be wholly severed from the power the laborers spent in gouging it from rock. Perhaps when the scholar of nature does come to speak of spirit, he will see the lofty land taunting little men. But it is the same scholar who tells us that the land ought not to be left alone. Power occupies a landscape or nation as naturally as it fills a stanza. When, in a journal entry of 1846, Emerson transforms his distinction between our engine power over commodity and our contemplative power of spirit into an *ethical* distinction, between the politician who serves things and the poet who serves men, he gives us this:

> The absolutist is good and blessed, though he dies without sight of that paradise he journeys after; and he can forgive the earthworms who remain immersed in matter and know not the felicities he seeks. But not so well the middle man who receives and assents to his theories and yet, by habit and talent formed to live in the existing order, builds and prospers among the worldly men, extending his affection and countenance all the time to the absolutists. Ah, thou evil, two-faced half-and-half! how can I forgive thee? Evil, evil hast thou done. Thou it is that confoundest all distinctions. If thou didst not receive the truth at all, thou couldst do the cause of virtue no harm. But now the men of selfishness say to the absolutist, Behold this man, he has all thy truth, yet lo! he is with us and ours,—Ah, thou damnable Half-and-Half! choose, I pray you, between God and the Whig Party, and do not longer strew sugar on this bottled spider.
>
> Yes; but Confucius. Confucius, glory of the nations, Confucius, sage of the Absolute East, was a middle man. He is the Washington of philosophy.

The face Emerson had before him when he spoke of Half-and-Half must have been Webster's. But Webster turns into Confucius quite

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effortlessly, and Emerson thought of himself now and then as a sage of the Absolute East. To the sentence at the end of this passage we want to add: yes, and America is the Washington of nations; and the Ode is in this sense a thoroughly American poem.

In the penultimate stanza the over-god appears, bringing the honeycomb from out of the lion but also doing rather bloodier work: it is he that peoples and unpeoples, exterminates races by stronger races. He is the subtlest of artificers and, like the gardener of *The Winter's Tale*, "Grafts gentlest scion/ On pirate and Turk." But another allusion, at once more strange and less remote, is also at work in these lines. Emerson was returning, for the iron will and martial cadence, to Wordsworth's "Ode: 1815," which had addressed an unequivocal prayer to the God who

> guides the Pestilence—the cloud
> Of locusts travels on his breath;
> The region that in hope was ploughed
> His drought consumes, his mildew taints with death

—the God, that is, of victory in battle:

> But Thy most dreaded instrument
> In working out a pure intent,
> Is Man—arrayed for mutual slaughter,
> —Yea, Carnage is thy daughter.

Wordsworth later softened and qualified this terrible utterance; yet it belonged to the eccentric canon of poems that mattered greatly to Emerson; it makes an ambiguous legacy, which Emerson was too honest to deny and yet too canny to welcome by its original name. It is curious to reflect that his summons to the over-god observes all the forms of a war-whoop for the allied adventure against Napoleon, in the very depth of the spectral winter of democracy.

Having given over the discreteness of laws to the keeping of the over-god, Emerson retreats once again to his solitude—this time, however, accompanied by an army of thousands who stand ready to fight for liberty *and* solitude. One of Emerson's best known early poems, "Each and All," ends with the line: "I yielded myself to the perfect whole." Here we would have to alter it to read: "Aided by the over-god, I caused nature to yield a perfect whole, to which all in turn must yield." Emerson was of course shocked by the Russian

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invasion of Poland; but in the poem it seems hardly worse than a boyish trespass; the atmosphere in which the over-god subsists has converted everything to its own terms, and worked an eerie change on the words we use for good and evil. The muse, we remember, grew angry when Emerson deserted her for a cause. Now she is astonished because the cause has joined her. With some assistance from both her and the over-god, Emerson has won his right to stand alone. But at what cost? In the final sentence of "Experience" he wrote: "the true romance which the world exists to realize will be the transformation of genius into practical power." Every reader on coming to this sentence at the end of that somber essay will have felt certain of one thing: Emerson could not have known exactly what he meant. And anyone who knows Emerson well may feel certain of another: he was not speaking metaphorically. The iron in the soul of the Channing Ode is that a part of Emerson is in deep and unacknowledged sympathy with Channing's enemies and his own.

Poetry like history has its afterthoughts, the return in an almost penetrable disguise of an event too large to be easily recalled, and there is a troubling resemblance between the Ode and a more recent political poem, by another cunning respecter of "the angry Muse," Robert Frost's "Provide, Provide." Frost's occasion is a strike by the charwomen at Harvard, in the early years of the New Deal. He professes no sympathy for the strikers, and no shame or confusion about the sympathy withheld. The Abishag of his poem washes the steps "with pail and rag" after having fallen "from great and good," and we understand that no fall is without its cause. The poem affirms only that she should have planned her future with greater craft.

> Better to go down dignified
> With boughten friendship at your side
> Than none at all. Provide, provide!

When we provision ourselves with boughten friendship, we turn a spiritual good into a commodity; we know this, but are not less flattered and not less consoled for knowing it. The poem is delivered, as a kind of sermon, in the radically complacent tones of a Yankee minister, endeavoring at one stroke to confute every New England jeremiad that dared to lament the decline of a religion of faith into a habit of work. "What's the difference?" says this new

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and imperious voice of conscience. "If things are in the saddle, it is because we put them there. And what more have we ever desired, than to catch a trace of our own glory in the dazzle of theirs?" The Ode, "astonished" as it is, energetic and imperfect, may appeal to us more searchingly than the perfect freedom of satisfaction that we hear in Frost. But there can be no doubt that both poets had drunk deep from the same source.

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ROBERT PHILLIPS

Once

"Mother, what is Labor Day?" I once
asked. "That, my dear, is when everybody

else in the country goes to the beach
except us," she said over her heavy iron,

her heavy irony. Why everybody else, not us?
I wondered. Was there a national lottery?

Had our family, like blind Pew, drawn the black spot?
If we didn't go this year, could we, the next?

It was years before I understood. Years,
but one year we went to the beach. A new world,

half an hour away. I had never seen
the ocean. My big toe in the Atlantic!

Mother and the four of us on the beach,
Father on the Boardwalk on a bench,

under an umbrella, wearing a ratty straw hat.
Suddenly he was somebody's old aunt.

(Once he'd gotten sun poisoning fishing, he claimed.)
He looked at his wristwatch a lot.

Mother wore an ancient wool bathing suit,
her legs thin as the stork's. I leapt,

repeatedly, into the muscled sea,
the sea rumpled, my brothers romped,

the sun felt good, the salt smelt good,
Jesus! it was fun, and we never went back.

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Snap. Crackle. Pop

I will hire a master builder
to reconstruct my childhood

home. There will, first of all,
be a well-painted white bathroom

door directly opposite a tan
cellar door. That is essential.

On the inside of the bathroom
door the builder must screw a fat

brass hook, and hang there a thick
braided horse-whip. Every time

I opened the bathroom door
it swayed, gently, like doom:

Leather. Heavy. A stinger
at the tip. That whip was the end

of all fear and fear of punishment
whenever Father flew up the cellar

stairs, raging—whenever childhood
brawls disturbed his solitude.

Father yanked down our pants, flailed
the air. Mother hid somewhere.

Once he broke it on my brother,
went to Sharptown, bought another.

Today I had drinks with Father.
We exchanged old jokes, pleasantries.

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Yet underfoot I heard feet pounding
up the stairs. Overhead,

that flicked lightning in the air!

Vertical & Horizontal

Mother grew up in the Blue Ridge,
thriving on the various landscape,
the Southern sounds, the thin air.
He married her and brought her heirlooms,
antiques, pretensions, back to Delaware,
back to the only town he ever knew
or felt comfortable in. Mother fell
in love with a uniform, not knowing
how uniform life could be.

Ensconced, immediately she felt oppressed
as teacher's wife, and by the heavy air.
Could a soufflé ever rise in it?
"It's not so much the heat," she once remarked,
"it's the humility." The landscape?
Unrelentingly flat—not one hill
within two hundred miles. The natives'
accent? Flat. The townspeople? Flat-footed.
Even the songbirds songed offkey.

Father never noticed—he,
whose favorite catch was flounder.
Every morning for decades she rose,
deflated, a vertical soul snared within
an horizontal landscape, knowing
a steamroller had run over her life.
One week every year she returned
to Virginia, head lifted, and pretended
she never had come down in this world.

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Running on Empty

As a teenager I would drive Father's
Oldsmobile 98 'cross county,

given me o so reluctantly: "Always
keep the tank half full, Son,"

the fuel gauge dipping, dipping
toward Empty, hitting Empty, then

—thrillingly!—'way below Empty,
myself driving 'cross county

mile after mile, faster and faster,
all night long, this kid driving

the earth's rolling surface,
against all laws, defying chemistry,

rules and time, riding on nothing
but fumes, pushing luck harder

than anyone pushed before, the wind
screaming past like the Furies . . .

I stranded myself only once, a white
night with no gas station open

'till morning. Panicked for a while,
a standstill, myself stalled.

At dawn the car and I refilled. But
Father, I am running on empty still.

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JAY PARINI

1913

"Guarda, Ida, la costa!"
She imagined, as she had for weeks,
a dun shore breaking through the fog,
a stand of larkspur, houses
on the curling bay.

As wind broke over the gunwales,
a fine low humming.

It was sudden when she came
to rest, the *Santa Vincenta,* thudding
into dock. The tar-faced lackeys
lowered the chains, seals
popped open, and the ship disgorged
its spindly crates, dark trunks
and children with their weepy frowns.
There were goats and chickens,
litters and a score of coffins
on the wharf at once.

Cold, wet, standing by herself
in the lines of custom
under some grey dome, rain falling
through the broken glass above her,
she could think of nothing
but the hills she knew:
the copper grasses, olives
dropping in the dirt, furze
with its yellow tongues of flower.

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Naming the Losses

for Luke, killed in Montana

The floorboards sobbing over-
head, my eighty year old
neighbor is awake at 3 a.m.
and listing through the dark.
He hunches by the sink
and spews sour phlegm.
Pain rings in the plumbing
like a tooth gone bad.
No way to sleep now, lying
naked, sweating in my sheets,
I leaf through pictures
of another life, of dark-eyed
Sarah and her love. It's
late for going into town
or taking showers or driving
into mountains where
the spruce and tamarack
keep a silence we cannot
maintain.
I was eating
breakfast when they said
you crashed, your light plane
flipping as it landed:
wisps of fire, wings
crumpled in the dirt.
You're dead at twenty, flying
to the west. I'm thirty,
but it feels far off,
this dying, farther off
than sleep.
I met you
mornings in my class on Milton.
Green-eyed, rebellious,
you defended Satan
with his fists to heaven, saying

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that a man must be his own.
He proved himself a king,
you told us, grinning
as the class demurred.
The Christians hastened
to assail your pride.

One evening after dinner,
sad, reluctant to betray a matter,
you were at my door. I fed
you whiskey till you said
the only woman you had loved
was going west, she needed
time, you didn't know for what.
I listened with a grin
tucked in my cheek and told you
it was time you had to give.
You nodded as I held your shoulders
in my hands.
My lame words
stagger in the path of sorrows
they cannot contain. Damp
pictures wrinkle in my palms,
all Sarah, hair across
her forehead like a crow's
black wing. The pulse
breaks softly underneath
my pillow; bloodwaves
shatter on the rocks,
hard hours. The old man's
dying in the drain upstairs.

Sweet Luke, believe me.
I will name you dearly
in the endless losses
I am always counting:
summer's generation dying
in the fall, the long night's
waking, elders stumbling
in their darkened rooms,
Sarah in the salt, Pacific air.

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PHILIP DACEY

The Runner

How strange, he thought, that I should think myself
in training to meet death. That I prepare
my body for him. He thought that. As he ran.
He was thin. And getting thinner. The bones
that once were buried, happily, in flesh
were surfacing. Coming forward to meet
the eye. Or slowly developing like
a picture in a darkroom or the features
of a darkened room to a would-be sleeper.
The flesh was all a lie. The bones were true
and now were rising as he ran. To their
rightful place, in air. Like a word, a white
word, held back, so that no one heard
the light reflecting from it for so long
it dazzled now in taking on the day.
One had to learn to listen. He had to.
The ear could make out only, Bones, bones, bones.
The volume slow increasing. Gradual wave.
And no translation. Who spoke them, anyway?
Or it, the word they were. His feet, in time,
knew something. But they only beat the earth,
nor gave up what could carry him. That is,
as he carried the bones. So he carried
himself, like a gift. He was unwrapping
himself. As if the one the gift was meant
for were already here, were running, too.
The two of them. The one he'd come to meet
beside him. That shadow, scything the flowers
and leaving them intact.
How strange, he thought,
to glitter in the sun like this, the sweat
a wide and welcome riverrun, but yet

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to be a sacrifice, a calf, a chastened
calf of only fat enough to be a
margin, line, between two worlds, the less
the more the traffic there, negotiation,
at that border infinite measures guard.
He thought that. As he ran. As he measured
off the miles. As his health and death
off-rhymed surprisingly on this country road,
a distinction lost in vapor like smoke
from a fire. The sun was burning itself up.
The sun ran its marathon. It ran through
pain. A pro. Or, better, amateur.
Amo, amas, amat. A lover. And he
had come to rendezvous. As his breath flew.

NANCY LEE COUTO

Walking on the Water

You came walking on the water.
I wasn't surprised. I expected
to be saved from a tossing, too-small boat
in one glorious way or another.

But I'll have to admit I never
pictured it this way—you gliding
before the backdrop of a morning sky
stretched pink and blue and ochre,

you with outstretched arms, a saviour
in work clothes, your brown hair fluffed

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and radiant like a halo.
I knew I would be your lover.

So of course I swung my legs over
the side of the boat when you called me.
It was so easy to trust you.
How could I be in danger?

Setting one foot down, then the other,
I felt the waves jell into flagstones
that trembled like a pulse.
You called me: Closer, closer.

We walked that way together,
keeping a playful and careful
balance, living on seaweed,
letting our kisses scatter

like the white birds. It was better
than anything else that had happened
in my life. But the wind broke loose
from somewhere, making me falter,

making my pale skirt flutter
like the sails of the far-off boats,
making me fear—what?—drowning?
The waves melted back into the water.

And afterwards, thinking it over,
I knew that I was glad
about screaming and being afraid
and even about the anger.

You called me: Doubter, doubter.
Okay, but you got your hair wet,
too. Loving each other
is like walking on the water.

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KIM YONG IK

Translation President

IN THE MORNING a woman came to my translation office and wanted me to read a letter aloud in English without translation. She had bangs down to her eye-brows and wore G.I. pants. As I managed to read haltingly, she nodded with "hum, hum"—sometimes giggling and sometimes covering her eyes or her mouth with the back of her hand. I did not understand some of the words. When the word "fuck" came in the letter, she covered my ears with her hands and nudged me to go on reading. A breath of warm air touched my neck. I bent my head closer to the letter, away from her. I wanted no more offers of payment in kisses or sleeping. When the letter spoke of love making, she pressed my ears very hard. When I had finished reading she asked me, "How soon means in English, 'Som Dai'? Didn't he say I can go to America 'Som Dai'?"

I replied, "I don't know. I couldn't hear with your hands covering my ears."

"Oh, yes, that's right." She gave me a package of American cigarettes.

Puffing a cigarette, I went to the door to see her off. I saw a man running across the highway toward us carrying a cardboard package. An American guard was chasing him, shouting and pointing. Cars squealed to a stop. From the sidewalk a G.I. jumped into the street and caught him. The man dropped the box. Immediately a crowd gathered and blocked my view. With a siren screaming, an American M.P. car swooped out of the traffic. I went out to the street. The two M.P.s rushed out and pushed the man toward the patrol car. He struggled, trying to tell them something, frantically pointing at his U.S. Employee tag dangling from his neck. He turned to the crowd, "Please tell them I'm not stealing. Can anyone speak English?"

The guard said, "Shut up!" in English. An M.P. picked up the box and put it into the jeep. With a crayon he wrote on the pack-

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age, "U.S." The Korean man pleaded, his small eyes widening in fear, "Can anyone speak English words to them? Anyone?"

The American Guard thrust his hand against the man. "Will you ever shut up!" To the M.P.s he said, "I saw him sneaking out from under the barbed wire."

"English words . . . can anyone?" The man shouted desperately.

An M.P. struck his stick against the Korean's large forehead, sending him to the pavement. He cried, "I got those potatoes from their throw-away."

I pushed through the crowd. "I speak English. I got the box from your garbage." Too late I realized I should have said "he" instead of "I."

"Garbage?" Another M.P. said, "Well, I'll be damned." He went to the backseat and opened the package. He wrinkled his nose at the odor. "Christ, it stinks!" He then took out his crayon and carefully crossed out "U.S." The guard shrugged his shoulders as the M.P. handed the box back to the Korean.

The guard said to me, "Well, you people have to learn to use the Gate. Understand?" He left in the M.P. patrol car.

The crowd began to scatter, talking sadly among themselves. The "garbage thief" stood weakly and absentmindedly as though he would drop the package at any moment, then slowly dragged his ill-fitting G.I. shoes down the road, his hand rubbing his forehead.

I returned to my office but stood at the door merely looking at the barbed wire fence along which a patch of cosmos bloomed. Further up on the hill, an American flag was fluttering busily over the U.S. Army Headquarters. G.I.s were out on the street, many with their Korean girls. One with his plump girl stopped to look at my office sign: "English Translation; President Richard Cho; Hiroshima College Graduate." They didn't come into my office but passed me, grinning. I shouted to them silently; I didn't graduate from college—so what? An American bomb gave me a degree. Who needs a college degree to translate G.I. promises and prostitutes' dreams for "someday"? Would they pay a good price if they had known that I picked up English while picking up tennis balls at an American club, then some more as a house boy at a missionary's house?

I should have gone back to translate a few love notes, but didn't feel like starting. As I get paid for my work by the number of pages, I try to be wordy, using the most fancy, flowery expressions I

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can think of, just like the peddler boy on the corner, trying to make his half-melted candy sticks look longer by stretching them a bit with his dirty hands. The Americans don't like a long translation and sometimes call it "bullshit" in my presence, but they still count pages to pay me. They and their girls exchange in their love notes all sorts of "bullshit," especially at the tail-end when they repeat "I love you." In my translation I repeat "I love you" as many times as I need to make an extra page. I don't know how many extra pages I have written over the past fifteen years, but I now have saved seven hundred G.I. dollars. Would it be enough to go to America? What business should I start—a restaurant? a bar? Should I call it Golden Buddha? Or Silver Christ? It would be too expensive. What business in America would cost only a few hundred dollars? My English word-business here won't last long. As time goes on, those girls learn to speak English and know words I cannot find in my dictionary and they help one another in their new money language.

I heard someone saying, "You saved the poor man. Without you he would have gone to jail." I turned to see who it was. It was the same G.I. pants woman with the bangs. "Take some for yourself." She held up her shopping bag filled with sweet potatoes. "The price was good, so I bought more than I needed," she sighed contentedly.

"More than you need?" I said sulkily. "Are you showing off your wealth?" I didn't take her potatoes.

"Don't worry. I am still poor after paying for my daughter's air ticket to America," she said proudly. "Will you come over to my place to read my letter from her adopted parents?"

"Why didn't you bring it with the other one I read?"

"I was afraid I might lose it, carrying it around. Come over any time. I always keep my room warm and have many American things to show you. From the next corner walk up till you find No. 38. Remember the 38th parallel truce zone. If you are lost, ask any girl for my Western name Kim No Vak." She walked away, her long hair swaying with her hips in tight G.I. pants.

In the afternoon, a G.I. brought his girl asking me to explain his duty hours and their appointments. A man brought bottles of Johnny Walker and Kentucky Bourbon to ask me to write Korean words on the bottles; for this he only let me taste a mouse mouthful of Bourbon. If I went to the "38th parallel" house, the woman with the funny name might pay me in G.I. money, but I hesitated. I had

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never been in those houses. For that matter how many times had I gone out except to the market area since I moved here? Maybe I should go. A man planning to seek a fortune in America shouldn't be so timid. I should look like a man who calls on her strictly on business, not for anything else. Maybe I should put on my hat. Where is my hat? On the wall, a few nails. No hat. On the desk, I saw my dictionary; the worn cover had lost its corners, revealing English words. On a shabby canvas cot against the wall lay a folded green blanket. In a corner sat a small stove and a few cooking utensils. Where is my hat? I looked around once again but saw only my own white breath.

My hand went up to scratch my head, and there it was. I had it on to keep warm. If I had a woman, she could have told me that I was wearing it, but with a woman, I could not have saved enough to go to America.

At the turn of the sidewalk, children, their Western jumpers and striped shirts much brighter than the packing crate shacks, moved about kicking pebbles. I hurriedly passed by a dump pile of ashes, wilted vegetables and a stiff dead cat. Beyond a tin-roofed house, I saw the number 38 brushed in faded black ink on the peeling door. On the dirt wall was a barred window, curtained with orange cloth bright in the setting sun. Not wanting to call the strange name, I rattled the gate, which was unlocked. No answer. Standing on tiptoe, I tapped the window. A yawning voice came tiredly in English, "Much, much waiting, lover."

Hanging across the yard, laundry barred the view of the main house. She opened the door. "Oh, oho," she exclaimed. "I didn't know you were really coming." She was wearing purple flowered pajamas. Slipping off my shoes outside the door, I noticed a double size bed that took up most of the warm room. On the stained plaster walls were pin-up girls, high breasts and low stomachs. One with a bent leg was smiling at me.

As I sat down on the floor, she said, "Sit on the bed. I won't charge for sitting on the bed." From under the bed cluttered with so many things, she took out a Sears Roebuck catalog, which fell open to reveal an oversea air letter. She handed it to me, saying, "Her new father is a preacher. You shouldn't read his letter with your hat on." She removed my hat and kissed my bald spot.

While I was unfolding the letter, she left the room quietly. The neatly-typed letter addressed to Madam Kim was easy to read. "Your daughter has arrived in Tampa, Florida, today, and you

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have nothing to worry about her as she is now in the land of Christianity." Then there was a long quotation from the Bible, which I didn't bother to read. Instead, I leafed through the Sears Roebuck catalog, thinking of my own anticipated new life in America.

She returned with a tea kettle of hot water. She gave me a cup with a tea bag, saying, "A Big Nose said those traveling by jet drink this. My daughter must have had it. What does 'Lip-ton' mean?"

" 'Lip' in English is the lips of the mouth. 'Ton' is a lot. It would take a wagon to hold it." I laughed at my silly effort to chat.

The tea was hot and I sipped it slowly. She showed me a tube in a box. "Tell me what is wrong. A Big Nose gave me this cream but it doesn't stick to my face."

On the side of the box it said, "Dental Cream." " 'Dental' means teeth, doesn't it?" I said uncertainly.

She laughed, her hand covering her lipstick-smeared teeth.

I returned her letter. She stopped laughing and asked, "Did you read it?"

As I nodded, she exclaimed, "You read faster than any other translator in Seoul." I knew she had shown the letter to other English readers who might have taken a little more time so as to charge her more. She came over and hugged me. "Translation President, teach me how to read English. What did my daughter's new father say?"

I replied, "In America, everyone—black, yellow or white—is treated with equal respect. Who knows, your child could become President of—Sears Roebuck."

"My daughter, Sear's president? So very funny." She was almost crying. Lifting her wet eyes toward me, "A lump of my worry is growing every day, Translation President. I carry a baby."

"Talk to the father," I said. "You know, don't you?"

"I told my tall Big Nose it is his but I am not certain."

I touched her stomach lightly, and tried to be flippant. "Maybe you had too much 'lip-ton.' "

"You don't believe me?" She lowered her PX pajama trousers, exposing her belly. "Feel the baby." She took my hand to her belly.

The warmth underneath my fingers gave me a shiver. I felt a movement. She pushed up the pajama top and held her nipple upward. "They grow big too." My mouth moistened. I wanted her large breasts. She pulled my hand. "Touch it."

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My fingers clutching her nipple shook; my body jerked. I pressed her to me and thrust myself against her.

"Quick like a PX radio." She pinched my nose and swayed to the bed. "I thought you came to read my letter only."

I undid my belt, started to unbotton my trousers. She mocked teasingly, "A rapist cock, eh?"

Standing straight, she undressed as though I were not there at all. Her arms swinging like a military sergeant, she stepped to the bed to lie down. This must be the way of a G.I. woman.

I was still rigid, nodding. Without moistening, I entered her. She muttered in English, "My lov-er, my horn-ee" and puffed air like a machine. She rocked laughing. Each "lov-er, horn-ee" slackened me. Did she take me for her Americans? Angrily I threw my body at her. The old bed squeaked.

Then her lips trembled, her powdered face, washed with my sweat, shone pale and clean as though not belonging to the style of a G.I. pants woman. I floated high, still higher. She clutched my hair, clinging and groaning; I flew and flooded.

I lay in bed, "horn-ee, lov-er" ringing in my ear. With a huge American bath towel, she wiped my groin and kissed it tenderly. "Translation President, you should come over often," she smiled. "I receive Koreans too."

Is she happy because she no longer owes me? As I was silent, she said, "You don't have to sleep with me. Come over to teach me English, Translation President."

"You know all you need—two words, 'horn-ee, lov-er.' "

"Don't be unkind. You just had a love-peak with Kim No Vak. When I go to America 'Som Dai,' I should read at least street-signs to find my daughter's place." After a long pause, she sighed deeply. "I did everything to send her to America. Now I have another inside—Oriental or white, I can't say." The curtain was no longer orange. Her face in the shadow looked sad and soft. I was thinking of the wife of that "garbage thief" who might be cutting off the bad portions of the potatoes, to cook them for supper. Did he tell her how he got them? For a moment I shared Kim No Vak's worries for the unborn child, but I felt tricked by her who let me touch her body talking about her baby. "Why America?" I wanted to hurt her. "You sent your daughter there, so she would grow up to meet her 'lov-er' and 'horn-ee' in bed?"

She slapped me. "My daughter will never be like me. You are a translator of the pimp language. Why America? There, no one will look down on her as a G.I.-prostitute's baby."

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Putting my hand to my cheek, I sat stiff and straight on the bed.

"President, I am sorry," she said quietly. "You must leave before my Big Nose comes."

"I won't go before you apologize."

"I said I was sorry, didn't I?"

"Down on the floor and give a humble bow to your tutor of the pimp language," I demanded. "And not in the pajamas your Big Nose bought."

"No one bows naked, not even in the public bath."

"I won't go, then." I didn't like her trying to make me leave so hurriedly.

"Will you promise to leave if I do it?"

"Nothing. I promise nothing."

She took off her pajamas. Her body slowly bent to the floor. She mumbled her apology.

A jeep rumbled to a stop outside. There was a tapping at the curtained window. She jumped to her feet and threw my clothes and hat at me. The entrance gate squeaked and the door opened. A voice in English called, "Number one lover, sleeping? Kim No Vak, Hoh-nee."

I put on my pants. She whispered urgently, "Tell him you are my English teacher."

He turned on the light. An American held up a case of beer, his red head almost touching the ceiling. He stood staring at me. I continued dressing.

She moved forward to hug him, but he shook her off sharply and said to me, "You have no right—." His words were too fast for me to understand the rest.

"*You* have no right." I talked back.

"I spent four hundred U.S. dollars for her when her daughter left for America." He repeated the amount louder in Korean, "*Sa-back.*" He went on, "She said no more *shibi shibi* with Koreans. She said no more matinee love either."

I did not understand "matinee."

She said in English, "No, me no more mar-tinee. Don't piss off Jim-ee." Her hand moved like a fan. "Me learn English; 'dental cream,' 'lip-ton'—many English, so I go America with you."

He turned to her shouting, "Bullshit!" and stepped aside for me to pass.

As I came out, the door slammed shut behind me. The crash of beer cans, screams and thumps came from the house, but I hurried down the road away from the quarrel. Across the highway the

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lighted English sign board of the Army entrance post was too bright. A stream of cars whisked by the sign.

In the morning I bought rice and charcoal bricks at the market and returned to my place to cook breakfast. A woman with a white cloth over her head was waiting in front of the door. She did not seem like a client but more like a nun. I had never seen any nun in G.I. pants. As she turned toward me, I drew back startled and dropped the bricks. Kim No Vak, face swollen blue, cried hoarsely, "Look what he has done to me." She removed the cloth from her head. Her hair, her bangs were gone; short, cropped unevenly. I tried to say something, but my tongue couldn't move. Her pointed chin quivered in fury. Her hands trying to cover where her hair had been, she said, "While choking me with his big hand, he snipped off my hair." She turned to show me the back of her head—light and dark as though a hungry mouse had gnawed at it when she was asleep. "My mother always said the only thing she had done for me was to make a beautiful, round, smooth head. She did it by turning my head often on the pillow when I was a baby."

I took my hat off a hook on the wall and put it on her head. She sobbed, "It looks so ugly, doesn't it? Oh, my beautiful hair."

Avoiding her eyes, I looked at the broken charcoal bricks outside. "You have lost your long, beautiful hair, so?"

She stopped crying and asked, "Will you go with me to the M.P. station?"

"There, you won't get anything but lose the G.I. pants you are wearing." I didn't want to get involved.

She bit her dry lips, breathing unhappily. "Write an English letter for me, then, so I could send it to the G.I. 'star' chief."

"My English wouldn't be good enough to reach that high," I evaded. An American investigation would find out about my false college graduate door sign and my black market money changing too. Meeting her unhappy glare I tried to explain to her, "While picking up tennis balls at a foreigners' club, I first picked up some English words from Americans. But every time I ran after a ball, I felt like a dog, so I resigned. At a missionary's house where I worked I learned high class English, but I didn't stay long."

"No one would quit such a good job," she said suspiciously. "You are making up a story."

I went on, saying something I hadn't told anyone. "The missionary didn't let me use his family toilet but an outhouse which he kept for Koreans. Whenever I went to the outhouse I always took

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the English Bible to read a page or two and then used the clean, soft papers as toilet tissue. The missionary found out what I was doing."

"I didn't know a Western preacher is so unkind," she muttered worriedly. The hand holding on my hat was shaking. She asked, "Don't you think my daughter can use the indoor toilet?"

I didn't answer. As though she suddenly remembered her hair, she cried angrily, "You don't help me at all, you coward."

After a long silence, I said, "You should give up your trade."

"Selling your pimp words for the rice you eat, you tell me to change to some better way." She stuck out her lower lip. "What do you want me to do to feed myself and my unborn child? Tell me." She wiped her tears. "I told the bad Big Nose that when the baby is born, I'll never let him see him but always tell his baby what a terrible beast his father was. Then he kicked me." She rubbed her buttocks painfully. "Now I should go around newspaper people to tell my story. They will help me."

No doubt reporters would come to ask me all sorts of questions as witness. And I didn't want to offend the American Embassy people by talking ill of an American at the time when I was planning to apply for a U.S. visa. "They will take pictures of your shaved head and sell them all over Korea, across the 38th parallel, across the sea, Japan, and America. Your daughter in America can never be the president of Sears Roebuck, never, on account of you."

Her large eyes looked beyond me, gathering water. "Maybe I shouldn't. I shouldn't advertise myself," she said, her hand over her trembling mouth. She wept hoarsely.

Finally I said, "We'll go to the market wig store."

"You will buy me hair?"

As I nodded, she hugged me so abruptly that the brim of the hat she had on hit my nose. She said excitedly, "Do you care for me that much?"

"Don't come back here any more," I said, but in her excitement she didn't seem to hear. When the door knob turned and a new G.I. pants girl came in, she placed my hat by my English dictionary on the table and walked out past my new client with dignity.

After receiving new translation work, I went out to find her waiting. She considerately walked apart from me. Near the market corner a newspaper boy came shouting, "Half-price for the morning news!" I glanced at the headline, "U.S. Foreign Policy Stresses

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Human Rights" and bought a copy. When he gave me my change, I counted the cold coins carefully. Why am I throwing away my money for her?

In the wig store, the storekeeper with black elbow protectors came over to greet us. She passed the short hair section and looked at long black hair wigs. After examining one or two, she cried unhappily, "These are not real hair."

The storekeeper lowered his head respectfully as though saluting the hair she had dropped. "This synthetic hair doesn't get wet easily, and dries more quickly and lasts longer than real hair."

"I want hair, real hair," she repeated. The storekeeper blinked his eyes, bowed, and with a ladder reached a wig on the uppermost shelf. After dusting the hair with a brush, he handed it to her. Her long fingers running over the hair, she sniffed it as though she could tell the real hair by its odor, and put it on gently. In the mirror she straightened the tilted wig and looked at me contentedly. The storekeeper turned to me. "Nine hundred ninty-nine, sir," adding apologetically, "After all, it's human hair."

I didn't feel like haggling over real hair, so, unwillingly, I paid him. When the storekeeper started to measure her head for adjustment, I left the store immediately.

Afterward I seldom saw her except once in the market a few months later. She didn't wear her long hair wig nor G.I. pants. She was in Korean dress, her head wrapped in a white cloth. Her swollen stomach reminded me vaguely of her worry about the unborn child. Like most of my former clients, she passed me pretending not to recognize me, and I didn't call out to her.

One early spring day when I went out to sell a jar of coffee a G.I. gave me for a translation and to close my bank account before leaving for America, a girl hurried toward me frantically waving. She was breathless, shouting to me, "An American soldier is trying to take away Kim No Vak's baby."

Running to the nearest phone booth, I telephoned the M.P. station, then followed her. Near the 38th house, another girl was crying. The tall red-headed soldier was rattling the door. "Open it!" He was pushing the door, while someone from inside was trying to hold it closed. "No, no, go away."

I grabbed the soldier from behind but he threw me aside easily. Seeing me, he shouted angrily, "I have a right to see my baby!" He kicked the door, which swung open wide. She fell back on her knees. Rebounding, she jumped to the bed and picked up her

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baby. Clutching it close and turning her back to the soldier, she said, "No, not your baby, not your baby." Wild fear filled her voice. The blood trickled down from her chin where the door hinge had cut it. In the sunlight I saw the baby—the tiny Oriental face with thin hair. I had never seen such a calm face. Its unblinking black eyes seemed to absorb everyone who watched it and to know everything from before its birth. Her face mushroom white, she trembled all over. Raising her shoulder, she sheltered the baby from the direct wind. Behind them the soldier stood, his eyes remote, glaring. He then backed out from them and turned away. With the baby in her arm, she fell to the bed.

M.P.s hurried into the house, their pistols drawn. I raised my hands, so they would not shoot me. Finding the soldier gone, they withdrew their pistols; one of them talked into his radio. An M.P. shook Kim No Vak but she, though breathing, didn't stir. A neighbor woman took the baby from her—she didn't seem to notice. The M.P. motioned me to help him carry her.

In the back seat I wiped the blood from her chin and held her. The patrol car zoomed down the road, then across the highway, up into the Army Compound. The car stopped; she was carried away into a barracks building. I followed them and waited in the dim lighted corridor. Then I heard a shrill cry coming from the room—the sound so desperate. I ran into the room. No one stopped me. Under a bright electric light by a small window, soldiers were holding her on a table. A white-masked doctor stood over her, holding a sharp pointed instrument. Delirious, she struggled to turn her face. "Please leave me, go. Me did no bad." She broke loose from the soldier for a moment only to be restrained again. The doctor moved back from her, shaking his head. She cried, "Where is my baby?"

Stepping toward her, I shouted in Korean, "I'll bring your baby. Be still. This is not an M.P. station. An American doctor is sewing up your cut, so your skin will heal."

From the corner of her wide-open eyes, she looked toward me and winced as the doctor jabbed the needle into her jaw. She lay still, her eyes half closed, then slowly fell asleep.

I left and returned with her baby in the late afternoon. The doctor and his soldier helpers were gone except one who sat, reading a newspaper in a corner. Kim No Vak started to cry, saying she didn't want to return to her 38th house. When I suggested she go to stay in my place, she stopped crying.

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The soldier came and put a glass stick into her mouth and winked at the baby. When he removed the glass stick and left, she talked about the doctor's treatment. "A sharp pain awoke me. The light was too bright. All I could see was a pair of blue eyes over a white mask. When I moaned in pain, the eyes wrinkled happily. It flashed to me that the American would kill me. That's what I thought until I heard you." She laughed, her hand on her bandaged chin. She got up preparing to leave, saying, "Everyone here is kind—they let me use their indoor toilet." She sighed deeply in relief. "I now feel that my daughter in America is in a good man's home."

I sold her Western bed and helped her move to my place. When she saw the long-haired wig on top of the other things I had brought in a hired wagon, she told me apologetically, "Everytime I wear it, a poor country girl shouts in my dream at night in an angry voice, 'Give me back my hair. Give me my hair!' I guess the girl who sold the hair loved hers as much as I did mine."

I moved to her room in the 38th house, answering to anyone who called her, "Kim No Vak is not here" either in Korean or in English. When I left for America, she sold the wig and bought me a leather billfold. Handing it to me, she said, "I hope you make enough Big Nose money, so you can visit my daughter often like a rich uncle." In the billfold I found a neatly typed slip of paper. She explained, "I cut my daughter's address from the air letter you once read."

"Someday I will see your American daughter and tell her about you. I will translate her English word letters for you to read."

"No, don't," she said uneasily. "Don't let her write me here. I won't be in your place too long."

I held her in my arms. "Goodbye, Kim No Vak."

She pushed me away. "No, I am no longer Kim No Vak."

"What is your real name, Kim No Vak?"

"You will always think of me that way, won't you?" She snatched the address from me. "It is best you don't see my daughter," she said.

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LUCILLE DAY

Reject Jell-O

The man I married twice—
at fourteen in Reno, again in Oakland
the month before I turned eighteen—
had a night maintenance job at General Foods.
He mopped the tiled floors and scrubbed
the wheels and teeth of the Jell-O machines.
I see him bending in green light,
a rag in one hand,
a pail of foamy solution at his feet.
He would come home at 7:00 a.m.
with a box of damaged Jell-O packages,
including the day's first run,
routinely rejected, and go to sleep.
I made salad with that reject Jell-O—
lemon, lime, strawberry, orange, peach—
in a kitchen where I could almost touch
opposing walls at the same time
and kept a pie pan under the leaking sink.
We ate hamburgers and Jell-O
almost every night
and when the baby went to sleep
we loved, snug in the darkness pierced
by passing headlights and a streetlamp's gleam,
listening to the Drifters and the Platters.
Their songs wrapped around me
like coats of fur, I hummed in the long shadows
while the man I married twice
dressed and left for work.

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Fifteen

I was pregnant that year,
stitching lace and purple-flowered ribbon
to tiny kimonos and sacques.
I still thought sperm
came out like pollen dust in puffs of air.

I ate cream of wheat for breakfast, unsalted,
diapered a rubber doll
in my Red Cross baby care class, and sold
lipsticks and gummy lotions to housewives
to pay for a crib.

Oh, it was something, giving birth.
When my water bag splattered
I screamed, and the neat green anaesthesiologist
said, "Why don't you shut up?"
"Fuck you!" I shrieked.

"Breathe deep," was the last thing
I heard him say.
Ten minutes later I woke up.
The obstetrician with his needles and thread,
busy as a seamstress,

winked at the pink-haired nurse
who brought me my baby girl,
wrinkled and howling.
"She's lovely. I'd like a cheeseburger
and milkshake now," I said.

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KRISTOPHER JOHNSON

Therapy

We made
Carrotbirds
today,
a slowly evolving
species
of improvised
wonder.

Nearly each one of
Us
made one
with Our hands—
Our hands,
some spastic
and flailing,
a few hanging
lifeless
from the husks
of robot molluscs.

We made
Carrotbirds,
and We willed them
from the soil into the air.
We find Our amusement
in this kind of
quiet
personal
surprise.
We are the midwife gardeners
of mystical birds
that not only soar
above this comatose world,

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but rise in flight
from far beneath it.

Carrotbirds escort rare breeds of clouds
too high to be seen, across the planet.
They sleep in Atlantis in sacred caves.
Their cries are meteors and rainbows.
Their bones float forever upon the sea,

and for an hour
on a dreary worktable
strewn with buttons, wire,
and felt.

Fawn

I fill
a tiny china thimble
on the hope chest
with ashes.

She splashes gently,
a perfumed rite—
bathing with a manticore
she vitalized in the bubbles
of her soapsud bestiary.

I hear her ceremony
through the peeking door,
her flesh laughing
in the water.

Black Isis
soaking naked
in her
island sanctuary,

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where whales flower
on the dunes.

Curious
wild foam monsters
rise and melt,
peacefully
worshipping
her breasts.

She dips her fingers
into the tropical,
steaming snow,
whispering seductively
to a flying porpoise—
a cloud of gazelles,
feeling all the unborn animals
breathing
between her legs.

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REGINALD GIBBONS

Michael's Room

Your hand in your grandfather's—
as though the bone just beneath the skin
had cleared his thin flesh
and called out the skeletal glow
in your own fingers, too soon.
Bone against bone, surprising you,
bruises you both with dread.
Morphine, stitched incisions, nausea—
and your father sits in a chair,
his hands on his knees, still
brooding on the blood that made him faint.
While you wait now, holding yourself
together with the hurting that threads
its way through you, cold and hot.

A neighbor has brought her preacher.
"May we say a prayer over you, son?"
An unreasonable hope clarifies
their own cloudy pain, and his voice
climbs into a high monotone, as if
he were speaking to someone who's far off
or deaf or. . . . Your grandfather?
He's not really here.
He's been banished for good by your mother,
who blames him for the wreck.
Everything he's ever done. . . . Everything
you might have. But he hovers
in your dream of waking up healed
and you stare at his hand holding yours.

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VERNON YOUNG

Film Chronicle: Molière, Australia and These United States

SINCE FOUR OF THE FILMS I have elected to review here were introduced at the seventeenth New York Film Festival at Lincoln Center last September, I should extend myself to say a few belated and fairly kind words about that occasion. I saw fourteen films and except for two rancid chronicles by Fassbinder (homosexual masochism and dubious political economy) I thought that nearly all (before quibbling) were worth viewing and that four were exceptional. As these things (festivals and the like) go, this is a high ratio of merit. If I personally grumbled at Richard Roud's proclivity for the Germans (beside Fassbinder, Herzog was represented by two Herzogian films) I am ready to concede that you can never please everyone. Mr. Roud should be congratulated, above all, for having procured the French *Molière* in advance of the marathon public television showing, as well as for three others I found admirable, each in its own fashion.

Ariane Mnouchkine's four-and-a-half-hour film, *Molière,* I have reviewed at length in another journal. Here, I shall confine myself to afterthoughts provoked by the TV version shown on PBS last January. My first reaction was that the spectacular aspects of the film were considerably reduced "on the box" by comparison with their effectiveness in the cinema, but evidently home-viewers who saw only the TV version were as impressed as I had originally been by the historical panorama and by such explosive images as the flaming cart sent hurtling through the alleys of Paris during the student uprising; by the towering expanse of illuminated waterfall at Versailles; by those fabulous black-and-gold gondolas being towed across the Alps by voluble Italians and by, of course, the great closing sequence in which the dying Molière is borne aloft on an unending staircase, to the music of Purcell. Yet I must say that it seemed more evident to me than before that the film was not really *about Molière,* the playwright who broke the neo-classical establishment of Racine and Corneille. Theater-wise, almost everything in this movie which was *not* theater, was memorable, and Molière the man simply graduated from being a clown in the provinces to being a clown at court. We never learned how he became the author of *Don Juan* or *Les Précieuses Ridicules* or *L'Avare.* I felt that Miss Mnouchkine's adventures in the seventeenth century might better have been entitled "Scenes from the Age of Louis XIV" or even *Scènes autour de la Vie de M. Molière.*

However, I feel less insistent when I note the extraordinary excitement which the film engendered. Apparently the argument of the images was more indelible than any felt deficiency on the score of Molière's biography. (I even received a poem—very good, too—by a young woman

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haunted, like me, by that staircase grande finale.) And I'll confess that I don't deeply care if Phillipe Caubère was not the Molière of the professors, because I was consistently impressed by his histrionic control: the range of his moods, the styled mastery of his walk, his responsive eyes, his voice, obedient to every shade of passion, tomfoolery or grief. Perhaps the single moment from the film which will remain longest in my memory—every bit as vivid as the baroque gondolas—is that near-closeup of Molière before he goes on stage to his death, staring at himself in a kind of tearful rage as, with palsied hand, he applies the mask-like makeup while rehearsing, in a rasping falsetto, the complaints of *le malade imaginaire* he is about to impersonate, the vowels dragged out nasally like the despairing bray of a donkey—"*Je suis un pauuuuuuvre malaaaaaade!*" For moments like this (others were the father's farewell and the death of Molière's mistress), Miss Mnouchkine can be forgiven the detours she seems to have taken from the nominal subject and praised instead for her intensive as well as epic use of the medium to which I pray she will be tempted, or compelled, to return.

Over against the diffuse, multi-episode method of *Molière,* three films introduced at the Festival, now making their way in commercial cinema, were almost classic instances of how to *contain* a subject—with no trace of editorial interference. The best of these, to my thinking, and the recent film I would recommend above all others if you could only see one (not bad advice, believe me), was the Australian film, *My Brilliant Career.* This is something of a feminine achievement (the only top-staff *man* was the photographer): the story is from a novel by a sixteen-year-old girl published in Australia, 1901 (its authoress was ostracised and fled to England); the screenplay is by a female; the producer and the designer are females; the director, Gillian Armstrong, is female (age about 26, my guess), and the appeal of the film, apart from the intelligence and craft of its execution in general, is substantially the appeal of a young actress, Judy Davis, who plays Sybylla Melvyn, the headstrong, emotionally confused but mentally resolute heroine. If I shortly summarize the narrative as being about a "tomboyish" girl in the Australian nineties who believes she wants the opulent life and an upper-class husband but discovers that actually she wants to belong to herself because only in those terms can she create (i.e. write books), I imagine that a random reader might groan at the suspicion that this is a vehicle designed to promote the Women's Lib movement.

No. Miss Armstrong and her scenarist have not made a tract in which, as so often in cinema today, grievances have been manufactured retroactively in order to point up the inequities of another era when everyone except the rebel was an ass or a despot. They have recreated the nineties of colonial Australia with what appears to be impartial affection; the struggles of Sybylla with her own pretensions, her longings and her misgivings, her latent conviction that she is superior to her station, are portrayed with a fine respect for perplexities that trouble such assumptions. And the people (at the top) who surround Sybylla in this frontier where cattle-raising and tea-on-the-lawn are juxtaposed are not set up as a pha-

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lanx of reaction. They have their generosities as well as their complacencies and they have a generous share of wit. All around, the film has *heart*, and it is beautifully acted and mounted.

Gillian Armstrong, it is no surprise to learn, had been an art director on other productions; this is her first full-length job of direction. She has mastered one of the primary lessons, one that many directors never learn: she frames the representative detail before moving out to the comprehensive scene: the ax-head splitting wood; mud whipped by wind; trousers being pressed on a table; horses' hooves; women's shoes; hands on a piano keyboard. She and Judy Davis share a similar gift for achieving conviction which very probably owes little to any schooling process. If you haven't Gillian Armstrong's eye you may never shoot a notable foot of film. If you haven't Judy Davis' mercurial bodily response, you can take acting lessons until you're fifty (then, you might just begin to catch on!). Miss Davis has more temperamental fluency than any young actress I can remember since Elie Lambetti appeared (and as quickly disappeared) in the early sixties. Watch the way she sets her hat, changes her tempo in a dispute, hesitates before helping herself to more vegetables, alternately stiffens and relaxes the back of her neck when seated at the piano, depending on the degree of resistance or acquiescence she is striving to project.

The Europeans (from the Henry James story), directed by James Ivory who, until now, has been an expatriate making films in India principally, induces much the same kind of nostalgia for a society in which, however severe its limitations, manners and rectitude had not been discarded, as they have been in the emancipated societies which have succeeded. Ivory, speaking for himself and for his producer, Ismail Merchant, has written: "we saw [the film] as a kind of elegy for a beautiful and perhaps long vanished America, where people kept faith with each other and their principles, and spoke the truth." This, of course, is only half the story as James wrote it, which Ivory knows very well, since he filmed it with due respect for the mockery it also comprises. The Wentworths and their neighbors, near Boston around 1850, through whom the European Baroness Eugenia and her brother Felix hope to salvage their declining fortunes, do indeed speak truth, but they can speak little else. "There are so few subjects of conversation here," sighs Eugenia. Definitely, the Wentworths and Actons of Ivory's movie are figures of fun besides being pillars of integrity. The slight but engaging plot of this early James novelette recounts the eventual surrender of Felix, a congenial bohemian, to the puritan attractions of Gertrude Wentworth, while Eugenia, worldly and none too scrupulous, overplaying her hand, is left with the alternative of returning to Europe—a cultural fate, she makes clear, which is after all worth the loss of a fortune.

Among the well-chosen actors I found Wesly Addy's Mr. Wentworth particularly apposite to James's famous description (which doesn't get into the film), that he looked "as if he were undergoing martyrdom not by fire but by freezing." And if Lee Remick was not fully the continental personality one imagines from the book she was satisfactorily the next

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best thing, when you recall her uninflected presence from other movies. Lacking glamor, she employed intelligence. One perplexed film critic complained that the dialogue "didn't work" for him and that, further, the houses didn't look lived in. If you expect Jamesian dialogue to have that fragmentary naturalism of our contemporary-life films, it certainly won't work, for it is in the perennial vein of the comedy of manners (Congreve, if no further back) wherein speeches are contrived in order to elicit rejoinders which the author, not probability, requires. As for the houses not lived in, that *is* the point, is it not? They are inhabited by faces not lived in, something that James Russell Lowell was quick to perceive when he first read the novel in faraway Madrid. To James, in a letter, he expressed his chuckling approval: "you revived in me the feeling of *cold furniture* which New England life has often *goose-fleshed* me with . . . . I laughed and shivered at once."

On creative expediency in film production, Mr. Ivory's is worth a notation. James designed the action to pass during a summer season but as Ivory arrived later than he expected in New Hampshire, he thought to end the film, as everyone disperses or settles back, with the first snow. The weather was not cooperative; a blazing, golden autumn prevailed. Not to be outdone, Ivory managed his terminal scenes, with Robert Acton hesitating forever and the Baroness making her farewells, so that they took place amid lengthening shadows . . . . *The Europeans* is a beautiful film to look at and to listen to but it is not for those with sanguinary taste. The short tale was a muted essay in James's European-American dialectic, not the full-scale, incensèd clash of fastidious opposites. To me, the movie was a relief from the blood, obscenity and ill will of what has lately become standard cinematic fare. James Ivory, in his quiet way, is a hero for having undertaken so genteel an enterprise.

John Huston's *Wise Blood* is closer to the standard categories than it is to the films I have been discussing but I can't offer it as a contrasting bad example! Uninviting as it is, considered as subject matter in the raw, the film is nonetheless an uncompromising act of fidelity to the Flannery O'Connor novel from which, with chilling tenacity, it was adapted by Benedict Fitzgerald. If you read (or re-read) the book after seeing the film, as I did, you may be amazed to see that it is close enough to have been a working, if not a shooting, script. With a proviso, naturally: no film can be a pure transliteration of a prose fiction. With characters as *seemingly* stylized as those in *Wise Blood* (Miss O'Connor always swore that her freak people were neither invented nor, in the South, bizarre!), an ambience of fantasy is lost when the place, the characters, the events are literalized. Huston has incredibly preserved the matter-of-fact manner in which rival Jesus-freaks in a Southern city are alleged to behave; he has made no attempt to translate the bone-dry "ordinariness" of this lost world into a Gothic or poetic realm. I suppose the deadly aspect of this film is just the incongruity to us—should I say to *me*?—of an incomprehensible and perverse fanaticism thriving in a more-or-less modern industrial city (which has the *feel* of the twenties). There is something altogether heartless and repellent in the setting, especially in sequences that

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take place in a lodging-house (no furniture, ghastly wallpaper, ceilings too high) where Hazel Motes, a preacher in reverse (he offers damnation, not salvation), goes to live in order to be close to an ostensibly blind rival with a lewd fifteen-year-old daughter.

In films like *My Brilliant Career* or *The Europeans* there is a chance that someone will make an intelligent choice. This is impossible in *Wise Blood*: the people depicted seem never to have been introduced to the family of rational man. I hope I am not losing my sense of gallows humor. Hazel Motes drives a car over a fellow-proselytizer, stops the car and harangues the not-yet-dead victim; thereafter he blinds himself to confirm his spiritual superiority to the fake-blind True Believer. I am puzzled subsequently to hear the film described as "uproarious" or "hilarious," although I suppose the milieu is very close at times to that of *Tobacco Road*, if not to the Dogpatch of Al Capp! What saves it, by which I mean what guarantees it as seriously intended, is Huston's ruthless command of tone and I think centrally the sustained, humorless intensity of Brad Dourif as Hazel Motes. With the lion's share of closeups and dialogue, he is relentlessly a presence who may well stupefy you but never fails to hold your attention.

John Huston is a remarkable man: tough, irreverent, gruesomely sympathetic, unpredictable, and only moderately corrupt. At the moment when critics everywhere were writing him off, he followed such films as *The Kremlin Letter* with two of the outstanding motion pictures made in the seventies: *Fat City* and *The Man Who Would be King*, climates removed from one another.

Not the least striking feature of *Wise Blood* is that it's a film about preaching that doesn't preach. Your reactions are not dictated, they're your own. Ninety out of a hundred American films *preach*: evangelism has been built into the culture and the secular national version of the Bible Belt is the radio-and-television network. Even on *non*-commercial radio they *sell*; they sell you the weather; they instruct you in advance that you're going to hear Mahler's "great" symphony or Schubert's "marvelous" Fantasia. Americans seem to hate the gratuitous experience; everything from health to thought must be programmed. Infected doubly by the left-wing Protestant ethic and the advertising media, movie scenarists and directors explain their films as they go or mitigate terror and defeat with sociological nostrums.

A few recent examples follow. By the time we arrive at the "symbolic" denouement of *Apocalypse Now*, the effect has been vitiated, chiefly by the monologue given to Martin Sheen which intermittently tells you The Meaning of It All. *The Onion Field* begins as a nasty thriller, neatly crosscut between two ex-cons on the town and two patrol-car policemen. When the separate circles intersect, hellfire is loosed: one cop is shot down in cold blood, the other, wounded, is in desperate flight. But the filmmakers wanted to be reformist lawyers exposing the "real-life" injustice of what ensued. God knows, what followed in the *real* story stank of injustice, but you can't make a thriller and preach a documentary at the same time (you *can*, it's a TV staple; I mean you shouldn't!). The second half of *The*

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Onion Field is a redundant mess. *Natural Enemies* purported to give cultural justification for a man planning to kill his wife and two adolescent children, then shoot himself—he wants to save them all from a junk-food, junk-thought society. But the life this man leads in the script—that of a wealthy publisher—is not authentically threatened with the corrupt futility he broods over. By the evidence supplied, the real subject here is *not* The Decline of the West, it is intensively the sexual torment of a libidinous man whose middle-class wife is not as orgiastic as his private fantasies! All this scapegoatism instead of a divorce or a contingent of nymphomaniacs! *Breaking Away*, which almost everyone I have read or encountered believes to have been the best American film of 1979, is transparently a fraud. Supposed to be a realistically tender recall of growing up in an American high school (that'll be the day!), it is more farce than not while pursuing with some assiduity the earnest myth of the unbeatable populist American: that boring "Townie" who, with a damaged kneecap, wins the bicycle race against the upper-class fraternity competitors! The members of that club, by the way, are never actualized; they are only profiles on the fringe, culpable because they're rich and academically installed, whereas the "Townies" are omnipresent, presumably endearing and rankly vocal. Except for the dreamer who is learning Italian, their vocabulary consists mainly of two four-letter words—the same two, I was gratified to note, which were always audible above the din of the helicopters in *Apocalypse Now*.

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Reviews

WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

Fictional Fixes

BEGIN WITH THE FINAL PARAGRAPH of "Here Come the Maples," a story from John Updike's recent collection,[1] in which Joan and Richard Maple are granted their divorce in the Cambridge City Hall where twenty years before their marriage license was taken out:

> The judge smiled and wished them both good luck. The lawyers sagged with relief, and a current of merry legal chitchat—speculations about the future of no-fault, reminiscences of the old days of Alabama quickies—excluded Joan and Richard. Obsolete at their own ceremony, the Maples stepped back from the bench in unison and stood side by side, uncertain of how to turn, until he at last remembered what to do; he kissed her.

In a fix, just having come legally unfixed, suddenly no difference between freedom and obsolesence, Richard as if by impulse, but really on the wings of his creator's fine idea, does the thing he forgot to do after their wedding and ends the story. It is a moment when the reader feels (anyway this reader felt) that art, even the art of the novelist, enhances nature, delivering a golden world from the baser metal of Central Square. One's own life could be similarly surprising and surprisingly shaped—all one needs to have is a good writer behind one.

It may also be that Updike is fonder of his characters than most contemporary novelists are; if others think such partiality a vice, we may note at least that it was shared by the likes of Henry James and Ford Madox Ford. But I think the exhilaration of this moment at the end of "Here Come the Maples" has something to do with an unwillingness just to get your characters in a fix and leave them there. To fix them in all the circumstantial satire of life, then to allow them an unexpected breath of freedom, is only possible through some effort of style; without that help, the poor characters are just going to have to take their lumps, while the reader may wonder whether the spectacle is edifying enough to be borne.

Of course it's fair to say that Updike's mastery lies in the realm of the shorter flight. As everybody knows by now, his recent stories have been about the break-up of a marriage and the question of who lives where afterwards, does what, deals with the children how. The finest story in *Problems*, one I'd put right up there with earlier perfections like "The

[1] PROBLEMS, by *John Updike*. Knopf. $10.00.

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Happiest I've Been" or "Flight," is "Separating," which contains the best writing about a man leaving his wife and children I know of. But "Domestic Life in America" (life after separation) and "Here Come the Maples" are also fine, as are the shorter snapshots of "Son" and "Daughter, Last Glimpses of." "Son" takes its cue from a little-known Hemingway story, "Fathers and Sons," in which the parent, driving at night with his son, thinks back to his own father's life as the story suddenly opens up. Updike does Hemingway one better by imagining not only himself in relation to son and father, but his own father's life as a youth. Moving from one generation to another in short juxtaposed blocks, the effect is powerful and original. "Son" ends in the present with the boy escaping to his room, shouting obscenities, slamming the door (such things as happen in life) while the rest of the family huddle and whisper about what's happening. Meanwhile, upstairs, the son begins to play, on his guitar, the "Romanza" whose melody Updike gives us in its graphic shape: "The notes fall, so gently he bombs us, drops feathery notes down upon us, our visitor, our prisoner." Finally there is "The Egg Race," in which the man goes back to his 25th high school reunion in his "lost town" through whose streets he "prowls," and at which reunion the band plays "Tangerine" and "Near You" and yes, by God, "Across the Alley from the Alamo." As one who recently attended his 30th in a comparably lost town, I read it with the conviction reaffirmed that, at least for the middle-aged man, there is no American writer who can touch Updike.

After such verve and grace of gesture, reading some chroniclers of scenes from provincial life in Ireland, England, and Canada seemed a more effortful trudge.[2] John McGahern has written stories worthy of comparison to *Dubliners,* but *The Pornographer* seems to me a not very successful novel. To make your hero a writer of such hot stuff is acceptable enough if you can find something to do with that situation, and I don't think McGahern has. Early along the hero rises from his day's stimulating work at the typewriter, "stirred and flushed" and thinking thoughts like these: "Is my flush the flesh of others, are my words to be their worlds? And what then of the soul, set on its blind solitary course among the stars, the heart that leaps up to suffer, the mind that thinks itself free and knows it is not—in this doomed marriage with the body whose one instinct is to survive and plunder and arrogantly reproduce itself along the way?" What indeed, one might respond to such a poetical effusion. But usually the narrative prose is glum and laconic, a catalogue of having this drink here, walking there, making love so; then the next day . . . etc. McGahern puts his hero in a fix by having him get a woman pregnant, then weasel out of marrying her—all the while his aunt is dying. Comeuppance eventually comes to the pornographer—but for what? For not respecting human life enough? At a certain point in the book we cease to believe that really the tale has a shape anything more than arbitrary. And the low-keyed style offers no relief from the march of events. One may say, as

[2] THE PORNOGRAPHER, by *John McGahern.* Harper & Row. $10.00; A MARRIED MAN, by *Piers Paul Read.* Lippincott. $10.95; LIFE BEFORE MAN, by *Margaret Atwood.* Simon & Schuster. $11.95.

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Anthony Burgess says on the dust jacket, that McGahern's virtue lies in catching the "peculiar *hopelessness* of contemporary Ireland." Yet everybody in this book seems to have plenty of whiskey, good food and digs—the deficiencies are all internal, and that may be the novelist's fault as much as Ireland's.

It is typical of Piers Paul Read that he should preface his novel with an Author's Note informing American readers about the difference in the English legal system between a solicitor and a barrister. Typical in that it recalls the generally sober, just-the-facts-please tone Read has assumed in previous novels like *Monk Dawson* and *The Professor's Daughter*, especially in the extended flatness of *Polonaise*. Read depends on the clarity and intelligence with which he states, rather than explores, his fictional materials—in this book some familiar ones involving the angry middle-aged barrister who isn't getting enough from his job or wife or family, who then reads "The Death of Ivan Illych" for the first time and makes a sad identification. After reading the story, in a reversal of their usual situation, he refuses to make love to his wife:

> He smiled now into his pillow at the thought of the small revenge he had taken that night for the countless times when she had been the one to refuse to make love. Even now he suspected that she had only wanted to reassure herself that he still found her attractive—her whose body had borne two children and had become like a sucked-out grape. He now felt only repugnance and loathing for Clare, not just because she had spoilt his past life but for the role she would play in the future. He knew from statistics that she would outlive him, and he could well imagine how she who was so squeamish would detest his final sufferings—retching at his incontinence, cowering from his pain. His children might be sorry, but their expectation would console them—just as the Constable or the Turner watercolor would console Clare.

These sentences are as eloquent as anything in the novel, but eloquence is hardly the word for the unpleasant taste they carry with them. Who would want to drag one's eyes over such dismal meditations, unrelieved by a satirical glance or musical phrase of the author's? Only someone interested in the "facts"—the lore (legal, familial, political) of which Read is a master. I managed for parts of *A Married Man* to become that reader, especially when the John-Clare relationship is seen in the context of their respective parents. But just what sort of view we are invited to take toward the less than glorious affairs John embarks on, I'm unable to say, although Read contrives a shocker of a plot which convinced me of little more than that it was a shocker of a plot. For all the dispassionately careful observation in his writing, it's hard to escape the feeling that, in more than one sense, the hero has been fixed, his situation more relentlessly contrived than freely explored.

My puzzlement over the title (*Life Before Man*) of Margaret Atwood's fourth, and most satisfactory, novel did not clear up when a reviewer read it to mean that we're still living life as if the "human" hadn't yet evolved.

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I don't really know what that might mean, nor whether I should try and make something of the fact the Lesje, the least interesting person of the novel's triangle, works in the prehistoric section of a natural history museum. But the book's form doesn't encourage one to ponder anything long; for it moves us rapidly, by means of short sections narrated in an authorial present tense, from Lesje to Elizabeth (complicated, stuck with her dead lover's memory) to Nate (passive, a maker of toys, married to Elizabeth and moving toward Lesje). At times the language of experience is Atwood-satirical, especially when the thinker is Elizabeth, a rather nasty but decidedly the most interesting person in the book, who after going to bed with Lesje's man William (about to be dismissed in favor of Nate) ruminates as follows:

> Coupling with William was not unpleasant, she thinks, but neither was it memorable. It was like sleeping with a large and fairly active slab of Philadelphia cream cheese. Emulsified. It isn't that William is without mystery. He's probably as mysterious as any other object in the universe: a bottle, an apple. It's just that his mystery is not that of the kind that usually intrigues Elizabeth. On second thought, he isn't totally bland. Remembering the way he wielded his teeth, she's sure he has pockets of energy, even violence, hidden in him, like Mexican jumping beans in a box of cotton wool.

Atwood has always seemed to me a better poet in her novels than in her poems, as evidenced by the quality of this paragraph with its quite surprising jumping beans in cotton wool, and the nice qualification that, as slabs of cream cheese go, William is a fairly active one. But it could be said also that to give Elizabeth such vigorous satiric poetry risks making her in no need of our sympathetic feelings (of which I could muster up few anyway), so favored as she is by the powers of ironic and dismissive expression. (A bit further down the page she "winces slightly" when William wakes up and says the whole experience was "terrific.")

Elizabeth's husband, Nate, is a sadder and I guess more appealing character ("gentle" says the dust jacket) who is given to reflections like the following, his wife and children having gone away for the day:

> He knows they will be back tomorrow morning in time for Sunday brunch, that tomorrow anyway everything will go on the same, that he will stand at the kitchen table dishing out scrambled eggs on toast for himself and the girls and for Elizabeth, who will be wrapped in her blue terry-cloth bathrobe, hair only half-brushed. He will dish out the scrambled eggs and Elizabeth will ask him to pour her a second cup of coffee, and it will seem even to him as though nothing is about to happen.

And Nate "kneels; tears come to his eyes." This is after his wife, now gone to bed, has invited Lesje over for a little boeuf bourguignon, and now

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Lesje too is gone (having herself had a small weep in the bathroom) so Nate is cleaning up: "Who has done this? How has he allowed it to happen?" he reflects, ostensibly about his absent children but really about Everything. One answer might be, why Margaret Atwood has arranged it all just so; managing by an artful combination of present tense knowingness about how "She does" or "He does" this and that, with alternating sardonic emphases and moments of pathos so as to persuade us that this is how life really is—life before man indeed.

Well, maybe it is, and in the good old U.S.A. as much as in Canada, or Dublin or London. But I am troubled that this highly literary and knowing writer, able to contrive wonderfully expressive lamentations for her hero as he carves his toys, or for Elizabeth as she thinks about becoming an older, useless mother to her children—"If she makes them feel guilty enough they'll come and visit her on weekends. Her shoulders will sag, she will have difficulty with shopping bags, she will become *My Mother*, pronounced with a sigh"—that she is committed to such a hopeless, inflexible vision of her characters' fate. Nothing can be done, evidently, except to pick over the past, lash out in anger or self-contempt, get set for another day in which "everything will go on the same." There is that touch of mischief in the restive reader, tired of attending to the characters' eventually predictable *shticks*, which yearns for a break in routine: why shouldn't they sit down and read through Cardinal Newman, say, or the *Palliser* novels? Or get serious about Haydn's string quartets one by one? These "educated" people seem interested only in their own, endlessly preoccupying inner lives; and if to us (to me) those lives seem pretty dismal they should not be held solely responsible. Surely Margaret Atwood is more interesting and humorous than they are; and she might try to imagine a mode of narrative presentation less complacently controlling of their destinies, less tonally unflappable about their lives. A moment in which Elizabeth, confronted with her hateful but dying aunt, takes her by the hand, against her will, and says something "comforting," suggests to me how much more of such imagining this very talented writer is capable of.

With John le Carré on the other hand, the fix is everything, and nobody would lament that he fails to give his characters enough room to breathe.[3] The new book is a beautiful creation, taut, indirect, evocative in a manner that is occasionally close to the sentimental, but which mood such an artificial contrivance can accommodate without suffering much. It is grand fun to read *Smiley's People*, but no fun at all to read reviews of le Carré in which the reviewer feels compelled to have a go at telling (up to a point) the plot. I should like instead to suggest what's romantically attractive about this disciplined, professionally unillusioned writer. Consider a moment, just before George Smiley—called yet once more into service—goes to Switzerland to begin the final move in his struggle with Karla, Smiley's opposite number in Moscow. It turns out that Smiley is about to hop down to the west of England for a meeting with his divorced

[3] SMILEY'S PEOPLE, by *John le Carré*. Knopf. $10.95.

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and much-meditated upon wife, Ann; but he first takes leave of his operation's headquarters in Cambridge Circus:

> He entered the place like his own ghost, floating as if invisible down the familiar corridors . . . the first thing he saw was the welfare club notice-board and they were the same notices from his own days exactly, word for word: free kittens available to good home; the junior staff drama group would read The Admirable Crichton, misspelt, on Friday in the canteen. The same squash competition, with players enrolled under worknames in the interest of security. The same ventilators emitting their troubled hum.

He proceeds to Registry, does some homework on his antagonists, then having finished drawing various files, he leaves. But le Carré confides to us that

> there is a story the janitors tell that sometime after eleven on the same night, when he had tidied away his papers and cleared his desk space and consigned his few scribbled notes to the bin for secret waste, he was observed to stand for a long time in the rear courtyard—a dismal place, all white tiles and black drain-pipes and a stink of cat—staring at the building he was about to take his leave of, and at the light that was burning weakly in his former room, much as old men will look at the houses where they were born, the schools where they were educated, and the churches where they were married. And from Cambridge Circus—it was by then eleven-thirty—he startled everybody, took a cab to Paddington and caught the night sleeper to Penzance, which leaves just after midnight.

With scenes like this, and there are a number of them in *Smiley's People*, one knows one is reading fiction; the illusion is fully created—this is not life but art. After the messy existences we're plunged into by McGahern, Read, and Atwood, it feels positively exhilarating to encounter writing you can't read *through* in the interests of getting at something behind it called "characters" or "life." Nobody who really looks at it, and listens to it, will even want to try and look behind it. Perhaps le Carré is a writer for people who like to read for the sake of nothing more than the activity itself. A worthy motive.

Before moving back to this country, there is the fact of books by two English writers of high reputation whose later work it is hard to admire.[4] William Golding's story of a twisted youth, burned and deformed in a Second World War air raid, is both lurid and relentlessly unhopeful, as it plays with perversity in a cleverly withheld English way which ends up feeling all the more sensational for its withholdings. Either Golding is a writer of sensitivity whose heroes are truly candidates for Blakean revela-

[4] DARKNESS VISIBLE, by *William Golding*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $10.95; CANOPUS IN ARGOS: ARCHIVES, RE: COLONISED PLANET 5 SHIKASTA, by *Doris Lessing*. Knopf. $10.95.

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tions, too startlingly honest for the cheatings of society, or he is an essentially untroubled manipulator of "thrilling" experiences seldom seen on sea or land that make for exciting reading in a novel. The writer conceals himself behind his plot and characters, but on the basis of his new book I would have to vote for the second possibility. As for Doris Lessing, there must surely be a reader for this mere 300-page beginning of what bids to be one of the longer explorations of where we all are and what it all means. Her title (see footnote again) is no more formidable than the act of reading the novel in which one attempts, unsuccessfully, to hear a human voice. Ever since her early *The Grass is Singing* (1953) she has cultivated (or made the best of) a singularly unlovely prose, rhythmically pedestrian, asking us instead to pay attention to the rich meanings—about people, race, sex and nation—which lie behind it. But recently Lessing has attempted to rid herself of whatever modest variety she showed as a dramatic writer who was interested at least to some extent in imagining different voices. With *Shikasta* she has succeeded in squeezing out all possibilities for tone from her writing, and by taking on the exciting business of telling (under a different name of course, and as Space-Fi) what Really Happened in our twentieth century, she has managed to create a relationship between herself and her reader which is all or nothing: these are the deep and solemn facts, if you, reader, could but imagine them. Next to *Shikasta*, Orwell's *1984* seems positively playful. I suppose that after a bout with the Sufis, cosmic fiction might be the only place to go; but she has been going there for a long time (*Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, *Memoirs of a Survivor*) and it is too bad to have people, mainly academic ones, still try to hold her up as a noble contemporary novelist. If she ever told us very much about the way we live now, the new book should cause anyone but the hardiest of Lessingites to fall away from belief.

New Directions hasn't found a new direction in publishing Elaine Kraf's book[5] about a princess named Esmerelda who announces in an opening sentence that "I am glad I have the radiance," and who has a friend named Melita (female, I guess) who loves to paint plums and becomes upset when they are out of season: "She over ate [over ate?] during these times, and pimples came out on her back and face. Once I suggested to her that she paint the soul of a plum. She was very suspicious and thought I was being condescending, which I was, but I was also trying to help her pimples." Of Melita, by the way, we are told only that she looks beautiful when she has mononucleosis (and when plums are out of season?); while Peter is impotent and Auriel is extremely creative: "It excited him to paint his nipples, which were very sensitive, a deep green color. He painted hers [Ellen's maybe, or Esmerelda's?] red or turned them into twin anemones or blue fish." If you find this left-over druggy prose at all diverting rather than sickmaking, then *The Princess of 72nd Street* is the book for you. But I'll bet you're not reading this review.

Susan Cheever's first novel wouldn't be worth saying a bad word about except for the publicity rush it's received, which might have something to

[5] THE PRINCESS OF 72ND STREET, by *Elaine Kraf.* New Directions. $9.95.

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do with her last name.[6] Embarrassing is, I believe, the word for these adventures of Salley Gardens (would you think it? after Holly Golightly?) whose parents once took her to a party at the Soviet Mission in N.Y.C. where she met somebody named Yevtushenko (Leonard Bernstein and Arthur Miller were also there, lobster and ice cream served) who told her she was beautiful and gave her something called "a Russian bearhug." Note the modesty with which our heroine (who might even pass for Susan Cheever?) disclaims Evgeni's compliment:

> He exaggerated. But I was a pretty girl, with shoulder-length light brown hair, dark eyes and regular features. Medium height with a curvy body and full breasts. I would examine myself in the mirror in Jason's bathroom with a mixture of pleasure and dread. Plump but firm and athletic, my body glowed in the dim fluorescent light.

No wonder Yevtushenko headed right in there, especially since this lovely had on a black dress from Bonwit's (you know) and "big gold Sixties loop earrings." "I looked pretty good," she reluctantly admits to the stunned reader who gets to meet later on the Updikes (with their son David), Leo Castelli, Robert Rauschenberg and just everybody my dear. But life has its ups and downs, and you'll see it's no bed of roses for Salley Gardens. This book must be read quickly to be believed.

I've never seen or read Jack Richardson's plays, but from his performance as a reviewer—for example his review of a recent book on the Sitwells—one would expect intelligent flash and wit.[7] *Memoir of a Gambler* is a real book and a serious one, which doesn't sustain itself over the long haul. Is it enough of a "fiction"? On the cover there is pictured, staring out at one, someone I presume to be Jack Richardson, nattily gotten up in his gambler's suit and looking like a more intense version of John Havlicek. As if to lessen the made-up character of it all, the hero named "Jack" gives us scenes from a childhood that, again, attaches itself unmistakably to Richardson. Some of the moments are fine indeed, as may be suggested by this paragraph:

> During the summer of my tenth year, my father fastened on LaGuardia Airport for our Sunday outings. We would walk from my neighborhood across the vast lots of empty Queens until we reached the air terminal's observation platform, and there, like two otiose pensionnaires, we would sit out the hot afternoons watching planes land and depart. My father, being a musician, had traveled the routes of small jazz bands in his youth, and this had forever soured him on wandering, so that it was not from any desire to cross horizons that he coaxed me to the airport on visiting days: he simply loved the machines and the mystery of aerodynamics.

There is an attractive tone here and some nice sardonic touches in other places from the book's early section. When Richardson goes to Nevada

[6] LOOKING FOR WORK, by *Susan Cheever*. Simon & Schuster. $9.95.
[7] MEMOIR OF A GAMBLER, by *Jack Richardson*. Simon & Schuster. $9.95.

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and the gambling begins, he opts more often for a Maileresque prose which presents the gambler as superman:

> Facing me across the length of the table was a figure who I had felt instantly was my adversary. He was large, thickly built, with hair that looked as if it had been arranged strand by strand. He was well-manicured, well-scrubbed, and the suit he wore of celadon flannel clung without wrinkles to the outlines of his body. . . . He obviously considered himself a perfectly finished human item, and managed his dress and toilet accordingly. This was enough for me, a fresh disciple of flux and conation, to issue him a silent challenge.

But once the hero wins his pile, then loses it, then moves on to gambling in different spots and towns, the narrative slackens and the book feels even less like a constructed action that is going anyplace. We end up with Jack in Hong Kong and Macao, and wonder why we're there—is it because he "really went there"? I don't think the book is clear about what it wants to be, and that makes for uneasiness on a reader's part. Still, as we used to say in grade school book reports, anybody who is interested in gambling will want to look at this memoir.

Another tough baby, George V. Higgins, shows in his latest just how sentimental is the other half of his character.[8] Higgins writes a regular column for the *Boston Globe* in which he sees through various current cultural and literary pretensions; and the hero of *Kennedy for the Defense* (a lawyer, like Higgins) sees through most things connected with public and private life on the Eastern Seaboard of Massachusetts. As has been observed of Higgins' earlier novels (*The Judgment of Deke Hunter* is perhaps the densest) they're all talk, and reading him is mainly being willing to listen to the denizens of Eastern Mass—such as the car thief, Teddy Franklin (Cadillac Ted), tell you about the hazards involved in stealing cars from shopping malls:

> "You get an order for a Porsche, you get your CB and you go out in your car to one of the shopping malls and you drive around until you see one that you want. Now you don't want to fuck around all day in a shopping plaza, doing things to somebody else's car. Nobody else'll pay any attention to you, but shopping ain't like movies. You don't know when the son of a bitch is gonna get his new shirts or whatever he went there for, finish his fuckin' errands and come back and catch you."

The point is instead to sit in Howard Johnson's, look out the window into the movie parking lot and when the car of your choice appears, locked up by its owners who have headed for the pictures, you make your move:

> "They're gonna eat the popcorn. They will drink the Coke. They will watch the previews. They will laugh their asses off at Peter Sellers. And

[8] KENNEDY FOR THE DEFENSE, by *Geroge V. Higgins.* Knopf. $8.95.

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you will have their car halfway to Hartford, Connecticut, before they finish their first candy bar."

This is awfully good but does pall after a while, and *Kennedy* is particularly short on plot, while its portrait of a hero who really does love his wife and daughter *a lot*, is less than touching. Yet any book in which one meets gents who come out with things like, " 'Look . . . I'm a nice guy, as far as you know, right? I never pissed on your boots and said it was rain,' " shows a respect for the language. As Keats put it, English ought to be kept up, and Higgins deserves credit for being part of the keeping.

In conclusion, some words about four American writers, three of them comfortably past age fifty, who seem to me absolutely worth reading.[9] The youngest one at thirty-nine, Frederick Busch has produced a series of novels during the seventies, one of which (*Manual Labor*) put me off him because of its mannered "experimental" style draped about what appeared to be a fashionably violent subject matter. But on the basis of *Rounds*, I will take another look at earlier Busch. The two focal points of this intricately constructed work are a pediatrician whose only child has died in a car accident, whose wife has left him and who takes it out on his job; and a married couple whose occupation is the buying and fixing up of old houses, bringing them "back to health from swayed beam, staggered sill, rot and roof leak," and who are looking to adopt a child, the wife having chronically miscarried. Busch does a magnificent job in bringing both these enterprises to verbal life. Here is Dr. Eli Silver, dealing with the usual vicissitudes:

> He goes toward his office, then remembers the waiting drug salesman, turns and goes to one of the rooms to examine a bruised shin for sub-periosteal bleeding, which he finds. He cleans impetigo scabs, one by one, from the body of a six-year-old boy. The mother, reeking as if of very old urine, yells at the boy: "You shut your mouth while the doctor's working on you, Lawrence!"—and Silver cannot talk to her . . .
>
> He gives allergy shots, weighs babies, writes prescriptions, he counsels teenage girls on menstruation, and mothers on genetically linked insanity, he takes the blood pressure of a colleague's eighty-year-old mother because he owes a favor . . .

There is a similar authority and life in the writing about the houseman Phil Sorenson "fixing bright hot aluminum flashing between a wedge-shaped saddle of roof and the short side of the brick chimney which he'd laid in caulking," and in the process "stewing his brains out." Busch is also very good on the local area of Upstate New York (around Poolville, Route 12, for those of you in the know) in which his fictional action is securely located. *Rounds* may be, finally, too neatly contrived, but it de-

[9] ROUNDS, by *Frederick Busch*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $9.95; SO LONG, SEE YOU TOMORROW, by *William Maxwell*. Knopf. $7.95; PLAINS SONG, by *Wright Morris*. Harper & Row. $9.95; THE BOOK OF BEBB, by *Frederick Buechner*. Atheneum. $14.95.

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mands much agility and effort from its reader, who finds the activity a rewarding one.

William Maxwell's first novel in eighteen years takes the form of a "roundabout, futile way of making amends" for something which happened long ago in the boyhood of his hero whose best friend's (Cletus Smith's) father shot and killed Smith's mother's lover. Later on, after Cletus moves away and the narrator himself moves to Chicago, he suddenly comes upon his old friend in the hallway of their school; unaccountably, he passes Cletus by without a word of recognition. The book among other things tries to imagine Cletus Smith. But in addition to the murder, which Maxwell makes meaningful by the beautifully compressed sequence leading up to it, there is also the narrator's vivid response to his own mother's death, of double pneumonia during the influenza epidemic of 1918, and of his father's consequent grief:

> In the evening after supper he walked the floor and I walked with him, with my arm around his waist. I was ten years old. He would walk from the living room into the front hall, then, turning, past the grandfather's clock and on into the library, and from the library into the dining room. Or he would walk from the library into the dining room and then into the living room by another doorway, and back to the front hall. Because he didn't say anything, I didn't either. I only tried to sense, as he was about to turn, which room he was going to next so we wouldn't bump into each other. His eyes were focused on things not in those rooms, and his face was the color of ashes.

If this sort of thing looks easy to do, it's not; the control of tone is superb, the situation expressed as poignant and natural as it is made original by Maxwell's individual talent. "As a small child I sometimes had the earache, and I would go to him and ask him to blow cigar smoke in my ear. He would stop talking and draw me toward him and with his lips almost touching my ear breathe warm smoke into it. It was as good a remedy as any, and it was physically intimate." These things must really have happened (that smoke in the ear brought back to me a childhood moment I hadn't thought about in how many years) but Maxwell never lets one lose the sense of a story being told whose individual parts are there not because they just happened but because they contribute to the emotional tone of the whole. What does it feel like to move into the just-built new house where you and your friend have been playing regularly after school?

> It was like having to spend a lot of time with a person you didn't know very well. And I missed the way it used to be when there was no roof yet and the underflooring was littered with shavings and bent nails and pieces of wood I could almost but not quite think what to do with. Now there was nothing on the floor but rugs and you couldn't do daring things because if you did you might leave a mark on the wallpaper.

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It is a gem of a book, and its sudden appearance, as if by magic, makes one think about the pleasures and surprises of living in a large country where not only young, but older writers one had forgotten were around, vigorously assert their presence and voice.

Our "aging saints" was the way Roger Sale once characterized Wright Morris and Frederick Buechner as American novelists (Sale added Thomas Savage, and let us add William Maxwell). Saints or no they are surely WASP writers of imagination and persistence, who possess in common a less-than-going relationship with the mythical general reader. (My students, who admittedly don't read many or any new novels, probably have heard of none of them.) But here is Morris' nineteenth novel, as solid and clever a piece of work as he's produced in the last twenty years since *Ceremony In Lone Tree*. *Plains Song* follows three generations of a Nebraska family, with special attention to its women. The progenitor, Cora Atkins, is of such an appearance as to create a pun involving the novel's title:

> It flatters a man to possess a woman who attracts the envious glances of other men, with her exceptional carriage or well-turned ankles, but a subtler attraction may be aroused if the woman is lacking in such attractions. A plain woman may well have been chosen for her character, or womanly nature, or because the poor devil actually loved her. In any case, the man's motives might have been of a higher rather than a lower order. Such a woman gets a second, appraising look to determine what it is the man sees in her. Such a man is judged as subtly superior to the attractions that contribute little to a sound marriage, the establishment of a home, and the proper rearing of a family. It reassures those men who have made a similar decision, and is the envy of those who have acted less wisely.

A typical paragraph, and if it doesn't strike you as an artful piece of work, no point in reading further. Morris is a tease, is both fond of his people, of their circumstances, and appalled by them; as in Empsonian pastoral, in one way he's better—at least smarter—than they are, but in another way not so good.

This doubleness plays around under a perfectly cool surface on which the deadpan narrator operates, asking innocent questions about Cora's appearance:

> The under garments appropriate to all women gave her hips a roundness that was deceptive, but nothing could have been further from her purpose. What could a woman do if modest attire merely enhanced what she meant to conceal? The question is rhetorical: so far as is known she never asked it.

Morris' vice has always been, both in his fiction and his essays, a tendency toward whimsy and superciliousness, indulged in this book by asking too many of these rhetorical questions no character could ever have asked. It means that at such moments the narrator becomes a bit too much The

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Humorist, winking out at us from behind his characters' skirts, or whatever appropriate garments they may be wearing. This means that he doesn't achieve what Pound praised Frost for achieving in *North of Boston*: the "sheer presentation" of experience, rather than trying to bring out its ludicrous aspects. At the same time, the novel is filled with the convincing look and feel of things—player rolls on the piano, white Leghorn eggs or buttermilk drunk down and followed by a rumbling belch, a new kind of lighting disliked by Cora's husband because "The bulbs burned out, they were too bright to read by, and you couldn't turn them up and down like a lamp, only on and off" (I never thought of that before). And there are moments of sheer comic pleasure, reminiscent of Flannery O'Connor's mastery:

> "Avery works in a creamery," said Madge, "but he don't like it."
> Fayrene said, "He's going to be an animal doctor."
> "A veter-nary," said Avery.
> Ned said, "That's good business if you stay clear of the dogs and cats."
> "Farm animals a specialty," said Avery. He stopped eating to enjoy their attention, suck air between his spaced teeth.

As Moses the cat goes round the table to look up at this hero, he is scooped up by Avery: "With a practiced gesture he curled back the cat's lips, showing his yellow teeth, and using the thumbnail of his right hand, he chipped off flakes of tartar like scales of paint. 'See that' he said, holding the thumb toward Sharon. She was too stunned to react." To say it once more, we should be grateful for Morris.

And for Frederick Buechner, whose four novels about the fortunes of Leo Bebb (founder of the Church of Holy Love and hero of the strangest story Antonio Parr, the narrator, has ever heard) have now been combined to form a tetralogy. Like others of that breed which come to mind—*Parades End* and (before it got longer) *Paterson*—the best part is the first part. Buechner says in the Introduction to the new volume that when he finished *Lion Country* (1971) he thought he had done with these characters, but that they refused to go away and lie down. My own feeling is that he manages to sustain the level of that first volume through much of the second (*Open Heart*, 1972), and that there is a distinct falling-off in the later volumes—not any falling off in Buechner's fascination with his extraordinary characters, but in a reader's ability to respond comparably as they come round once again for another performance. In the only intelligent notice (indeed virtually the only notice) *The Book of Bebb* has received, Benjamin DeMott (*Atlantic*, September 1979) compared its use of a low-keyed narrator through which the highjinks of Bebb and his cohorts are revealed, to *The Great Gatsby*; and I remember reviewing *Lion Country* in these pages and being struck by how much the narrator's voice resembled the one Fitzgerald invented for Nick Carraway. But since *The Book of Bebb* is at least eight times as long as *Gatsby*, there is a problem of giving the narrator continuingly interesting things to say and do.

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What I love about Buechner may be indicated by the following paragraph from the first volume, in which Antonio meets his ex-brother-in-law, and his nephews whom he is taking to see their mother (Miriam, Antonio's sister) who is fatally ill:

> It was typical somehow of Charlie Blaine to pick under the clock at the Biltmore for the place where he and the boys were to meet me. Juniors up from Princeton and Sophomores down from Smith, young ensigns on leave from the Pacific and girls who wept at *Mrs. Miniver* and did their turn at the USO, attractive young people all the way back from himself and Miriam, I suppose, to Zelda and Scott—this was undoubtedly the way Charlie thought of the Biltmore, and of course he was dead wrong on two counts. Number one, if it was still the kind of place he remembered its having been, it was the wrong place to meet the brother of your ex-wife when she was dying of myeloma. Number two, it was no longer the kind of place he remembered and hadn't been for years. When I got there the only people sitting on the curved banquette under the clock were an elevator man picking his nose and a fat woman with an orchid corsage pinned to a coat who was reading the *Daily News*.

At other moments he expresses a rush of feeling toward someone else, of which cool Nick Carraway was also capable. In *Open Heart*, when Antonio's high school student, Laura Fleischman, reads aloud in class the lines from *Lear* beginning "Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are," Buechner writes, unembarrassedly,

> Every person has one particular time in his life when he is more beautiful than he is ever going to be again. For some it is at seven, for others at seventeen or seventy, and as Laura Fleischman read out loud from Shakespeare, I remember thinking that for her it was probably just then. Her long hair dividing over her bare shoulders, her lashes dark against her cheeks as she looked down at the page, she could go nowhere from this moment except away from it.

I realize that, in leaning strongly toward the reflective consciousness of the narrator, turned in upon itself, musing on the humor and sadness of things, I'm truncating the book, playing down the tall-story spectacular propensities of Leo Bebb's and others' antic dispositions. But the reflective moments just may be the ones from this saga which will wear most well. Which matters a good deal less than insisting that, as it says on the jacket and I never quite believed before, Frederick Buechner *is* one of our finest writers. Readers of *The Book of Bebb* will I think find this judgment something more than the fantasy of a middle-aging reviewer.

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PATRICIA MEYER SPACKS

Hidden Meanings

"YOU KNOW, words mean more than we mean to express when we use them: so a whole book ought to mean a great deal more than the writer meant."[1] Lewis Carroll—who offered this observation to children inquiring the significance of *The Hunting of the Snark*—used words in extravagant abundance. Hundreds of thousands survive. The newly edited letters fill two volumes, more than twelve hundred pages; they comprise a small fraction of those Carroll wrote. They join a mass of previously published work, nonsense books and mathematical treatises and works on logic and directions for word games. If all mean more than the writer meant, they do not readily yield their significance. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, Oxford don, clergyman, mathematician, and Lewis Carroll, master of the nonsensical, remain distinct personalities, merging, perhaps, only in their mutual fondness for little girls. For children Carroll spun epistolary fantasies of split personality and errant kittens; about them Dodgson wrote careful letters to parents. What he really felt for them, we can only surmise.

The opaqueness of the letters—so much evidence, so little open revelation—may prepare a reader for the disappointments of the new biography.[2] Not a work of the imagination (as great biographies must be) but a piece of meticulous research, *Lewis Carroll: A Biography* leaves its subject perplexing as ever. Dodgson's visible life, by this account and that of the letters, followed a monotonous course. Third child of eleven, he grew up under the influence of a powerful clergyman father who lectured in mathematics at Oxford before assuming the cares of a rural parish. The boy's imaginative gifts emerged early, in the stories he told his siblings, particularly the seven girls, but his parents attached no great value to such powers. They encouraged their eldest son to follow his father's course. Young Charles too took clerical orders (not proceeding, however, beyond the status of deacon); he too became an Oxford lecturer in mathematics, spending his entire adult life in the university. Once, at the age of thirty-five, he went abroad, traveling to Russia with his friend Henry Parry Liddon. In England, he confined himself mainly to Oxford, London, and the seaside resort of Eastbourne. He took up photography, then abandoned it. He wrote voluminously. As Lewis Carroll, he gave away numberless copies of his books, dozens of stamp cases, hundreds of biscuit tins illustrated with scenes of *Alice*. He cultivated "child-friends," his definition of the classification gradually expanding to include women in their twenties. For nine years he served as curator of Christ Church, worrying

[1] THE LETTERS OF LEWIS CARROLL, edited by *Morton N. Cohen* with the assistance of *Roger Lancelyn Green*. Oxford University Press. 2 vols. $60.00.

[2] LEWIS CARROLL: A BIOGRAPHY, by *Anne Clark*. Schocken Books. $12.95.

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about the proper temperature of wine and the purchase of easy chairs. In the last fourteen years of his life, he refused all social invitations, confining himself to tête-à-têtes, mainly with girls, over tea or dinner, taking his friends on excursions to London theatres, sometimes inviting a child to stay with him at Eastbourne for days or even weeks. He contributed financially and emotionally to assorted relatives. He died of pneumonia. The death of his father, he declared, constituted the most devastating event of his life. Aside from that, as far as we know, little of note happened to him.

But after all we don't know very much. On the trip to Russia, Dodgson and Liddon stopped at Cologne to visit the cathedral. "We spent about an hour in the cathedral, which I will not attempt to describe further than by saying it was the most beautiful of all churches I have ever seen, or can imagine. If one could imagine the spirit of devotion embodied in any material form, it would be in such a building." So Dodgson records his reaction. Liddon's diary offers a different report. "Dodgson was overcome by the beauty of Cologne Cathedral. I found him leaning against the rails of the choir, and sobbing like a child. When the verger came to show us over the chapels, he got out of the way. He said that he could not bear the harsh voice of the man in the presence of so much beauty." The man who writes of "the spirit of devotion embodied in . . . material form" does not sound like one who would sob like a child; without Liddon's testimony, we could hardly deduce the intensity of Dodgson's response. And of course for most of his life no comparable testimony exists. Anne Clark, therefore, must guess or invent at crucial points, and often she has no way even of knowing where the crucial points occur. She reminds her readers that "when [Dodgson's] deepest emotions were involved he rarely committed them to paper"; on the whole she scrupulously distinguishes between knowledge and speculation. Lacking evidence of her subject's "deepest emotions," she cannot persuasively imagine the dramatic shape his life took for him, nor can she give it dramatic shape for her readers.

The biography finds its rhetorical center in Dodgson's writing of *Alice in Wonderland.* "To Dodgson, revelling in the sound of oars in water and intoxicated by the ripples of children's laughter, those glorious summer days took on a special significance. Yet in spite of the sunlight and the laughter, he remained unaware that fate was propelling him inexorably toward that one golden afternoon when the eager curiosity of three little girls would stimulate his imagination and spur him to scale heights of creativity that he had never before attained." The reveling, the intoxication, the special significance constitute the biographer's fantasy of emotional intensity, derived from no adduced evidence but posited to heighten the event which largely accounts for twentieth-century interest in a Victorian don. Dodgson's "heights of creativity" indeed marked a new direction for his life, but one may doubt whether "that one golden afternoon" ever seemed quite as important to him as it does to Anne Clark. (One cannot doubt that he would have found her account of it offensive to his sense of logic, decorum, and literary style.) The obscurities of his emotional experience, however, forbid definitive conclusions. Did he wish to marry eleven-year-old Alice Liddell, twenty years his junior, and did he convey

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that wish to her parents, thus precipitating a prolonged break with the family? The Liddell descendants thought so; Clark avoids committing herself. Why did he decline higher clerical orders and rarely preach? "A sense of personal unworthiness so strong that it can only be described as obsessional," Clark explains, but she offers little support for her theory from Dodgson's own writing. Why did he give up photography? Lack of time, Clark says. Why did he never marry? Shyness, she maintains. Why did little girls fascinate him? She does not tell us: how could she?

She might, of course, offer Freudian speculation about the matter; Dodgson's proclivities have long provided fertile ground for psychoanalytic speculation. As her answers to the obvious questions about the life suggest, though, she prefers a mode of interpretation resolutely modest and limited. If she allows herself an occasional fancy about the ripples of children's laughter and the propulsions of fate, more often she confines herself to what can be documented. Her research uncovers a few illuminating facts, about the Victorian mind as well as about Dodgson himself. Thus one reads with wonder an early review of *Alice*: "Mr Carroll has laboured hard to heap together strange adventures, and heterogeneous combinations; and we acknowledge the hard labour. Mr Tenniel, again, is square, and grim, and uncouth in his illustrations, howbeit clever. . . . We fancy that any real child might be more puzzled than enchanted by this stiff, overwrought story." Reminded of the sentimental view of children implicit in such criticism and characteristic of the late nineteenth century, one realizes anew how extraordinary is the achievement of *Alice in Wonderland.*

Much of the factual material, however, only underlines the apparent impossibility of finding the kind of knowledge one really wants. Lists of family friends ("Bachelor George Heron . . . was heir to Moore Hall and Daresbury Hall, and became Canon of Chester"), comments about Oxford in the springtime by Mark Pattison and John Henry Newman (yes, but how did *Dodgson* feel?), trivial narrative ("After their departure he went with his friend Harington to see the boat procession, and fell into dispute with the cab driver, who wanted double pay"): the more information, the less clarification. The absence or superficiality of interpretation becomes increasingly annoying. "It is fascinating to find that this most famous of all nonsense poems was not the studied composition of an established author in his fortieth year, but the spontaneous jeu d'esprit of a young man of twenty-three." Why should we find this fact fascinating, what does it tell us? The biography never fully defines its own problems. Nor does it resolve them.

Contemplating Dodgson's photographs may increase the reader's perplexity. Both the biography and the collection of letters reproduce many pictures, with little duplication between them, and Morton Cohen has presented with commentary in a separate volume the four surviving nude photographs of little girls.[3] The letters reveal Dodgson's intense interest in nude photography, mainly through his elaborate negotiations with par-

[3] LEWIS CARROLL, PHOTOGRAPHER OF CHILDREN: Four Nude Studies, by *Morton N. Cohen.* The Rosenbach Foundation and Clarkson N. Potter. $10.00.

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ents about whether they will permit their daughters to be depicted in "primitive costume." Despite—or because of—the photographer's reiterated insistence on his purity of mind and motive, one expects these photographs to provide evidence of sexual obsession with the prepubertal. Instead, three of the portraits depict coyly pretty maidens in poses of extreme decorum. Beatrice Hatch perches on a rock, her leg and arm entirely obscuring her torso; a painter has supplied lavish background of sea, headland, and sky. Evelyn Hatch nestles under a tree presumably created by the painter, who has also introduced surrounding greenery, a foreground stream, and two or three vague figures in the extreme background. She, too, has a conveniently raised leg covering breast and genitals. Annie and Frances Henderson lean against or sit on a headland, oblivious of the painter's background shipwreck and made thoroughly decent by painted drapery and leaves. A reclining view of Evelyn Hatch, face darkened, arms raised, and torso fully exposed, has more sexual overtones, but the girl's innocent face and purity of contour, the artifice of the pose, create an image of predominantly formal power. Looking at these pictures, one can credit Cohen's apologia: "For [Dodgson] to violate, even once, the tender purity of one of these young children would have broken faith with his God and with himself. His own uncompromising standards, his honest, pious nature would not permit a single exception. . . . In him came together an unwavering godliness and a deep aesthetic adoration for the nature of childhood."

The photographs of young girls fully clothed, reproduced in the biography, on the other hand, often carry a weight of sexual suggestion. Unlike the nude subjects, the girls in these pictures look immensely knowing. They pout at the camera, they gaze with somber eyes, their faces speak of secrets. Alice Liddell, age seven, with a wreath of flowers on her head, looks to one side, away from the camera, an enigmatic curve to her lips. Agnes Grace Weld, hair streaming over a lace collar, contemplates a dead bird, her eyes too avoiding the camera. Mary Anne, Mrs. Cameron's teenage maid, directs her heavy-lidded gaze to a mass of flowers, her cheek touching that of an unidentified small child with bare shoulders and voluptuous lips. These girls might inhabit a pre-Raphaelite painting. They pose in Turkish costume or half-recline amid elaborate upholstery with eyes closed. They look disturbingly adult, aware, self-absorbed. One thinks of Lolita.

Did Dodgson know what he was doing? Did his contemporaries see these maidens as we do?

Neither biography nor letters provide definitive answers for the second question, although the letters reveal some *contretemps* with families who declined to allow Dodgson to photograph their girls or who would not permit unchaperoned visits. Dodgson thought them motivated by excessive standards of propriety, victims of "Mrs. Grundy"; no clear evidence exists for what really troubled them. As for the first question—Morton Cohen's account of the photographer's "honest, pious nature" is obviously accurate. If he "knew" of the sexuality richly revealed in his thoroughly-covered young females, he did not allow himself to know what he

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knew. The camera saw what the photographer never acknowledged seeing.

In all the letters assembled by Morton Cohen and Roger Lancelyn Green, Dodgson confesses little about his inner life. He wrote and received more than 100,000 letters in the last thirty-seven years of his life; his Register of Letters lists 98,721. No one knows the scope of his correspondence for the first twenty-nine years. "Life seems to go in letter-writing," he wrote in 1887, "and I'm beginning to think that the proper definition of 'Man' is 'an animal that writes letters.' " Cohen and Green had more than four thousand letters to choose from; they have printed over a thousand, alluding to many aspects of Dodgson-Carroll's life. As concerned family member he writes about the problems of siblings, nephews, and nieces; as concerned curator he reports his discovery that similar bottles of wine hold different quantities and requests a wine merchant's commitment about precisely how much he will supply; as concerned author he discusses binding, paper, and printing and attempts to educate his illustrators about the geometric proportions of the human body. He writes to agnostics to show them the error of their ways, to teachers of speech about his stammering, to invalids assuring them of their suffering's importance, to students of logic encouraging or criticizing their efforts, to people who tell him jokes, complaining about the jokes' irreverence, to people presuming to connect Lewis Carroll with Charles Dodgson—telling them not to. And of course he writes to children: letters of nonsense, offers of books, invitations, explanations. And to their parents, always explaining himself.

Dodgson did not employ correspondence as a conscious means of self-revelation. Many great letter-writers epistolarily affirm their distinctive selves with pleasure and awareness. Eighteenth-century instances come readily to mind: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Thomas Gray, William Cowper. Even so consummate a performer as Lord Chesterfield defines his values and convictions and uncovers his real concerns in the long sequence of letters to his son. The letter as performance represents another familiar mode; again, the examples from Dodgson do not fit. Aside from the fantasy-letters to children, his written communications sound un-self-conscious, straightforward, with no apparent purpose beyond conveying an immediate message. A *Vanity Fair* review of Dodgson's mathematical work, *Euclid and His Modern Rivals,* comments, "Withal he does it so simply and so modestly, he so evidently is thinking all the time wholly of Euclid and not at all of Mr. Dodgson, that his work is absolutely refreshing." A corresponding description applies to most of the letters: in them he attends to the object at hand, not to himself or his effect. If his letters constitute performances, they mainly perform non-performance. The person one deduces behind them—with the considerable aid of this edition's thoughtful elucidating footnotes—values and embodies logic, carefulness, and integrity. Frequently fussy in his concern with detail (about the keeping of wine, the drawing of pictures, the dating of letters), he obviously leads a well-ordered life, but, unlike Lady Mary, Gray, or Cowper, he tells his correspondents little about it. He writes most frequently in order

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to make arrangements, for photographs, publications, visits, acts of benevolence, lodging places, purchases for Christ Church. Sometimes he writes to explain himself or a theological truth. Often he writes to entertain: but the letter of entertainment, after his early years, when he wrote thus to siblings, goes only to children. Never does he complain. In late years, he speaks of his own great happiness. He is, one can have no doubt, a good man. Little in the letters to adults suggests that he is an interesting one.

The unexpected impression of goodness created by these two volumes has a powerful and puzzling effect. Most collections of letters do not impel twentieth-century readers to judgments about their writers' fundamental moral status. Moreover, Dodgson's well-known fondness for small girls seems to demand tolerance (after all, he didn't *do* anything . . .) rather than moral judgment. I, at any rate, approached the letters with a faintly condescending expectation of understanding more about the writer than he understood about himself, certainly with no expectation of being morally awed. The letters reminded me that I only understand in different terms. They evoke a man concerned always to behave well, not by the standards of his society but by those of his religion. Priggish, fussy, logic-obsessed, blind to conspicuous aspects of his baser nature, he nonetheless demonstrates a continuing unpretentious heroism of moral effort. His unrelenting self-judgment expresses itself not in neurotic self-castigation but in ever-renewed endeavor. When a child-actress friend, staying with him, suggests that her father has lied about her height in order to get her a role, Dodgson risks the precious relationship by immediately writing to rebuke the father. He does his tedious job as curator with absolute conscientiousness. He makes himself preach, whenever asked, despite his painful stammer and more painful self-consciousness. In his relations with little girls, he never ceases self-examination, constantly checking himself for impure thoughts and motives. Psychoanalytic interpretation of his sexual orientation, so easy and so obvious, comes to seem true but irrelevant: Dodgson's total mode of being includes so much more. One doesn't *like* him, exactly, after reading his letters to adults, but one can hardly fail to respect him.

The letters to children, with a few associated communications to parents about children, make him both interesting and likeable. With children alone he found intimacy. Writing to a mother, he observes, "We are excellent friends, but I don't think she yet regards me as so *intimate* a friend as to show anything of her real inner life to me. I *have*, before now, reached such terms, and certainly a child's nature appears in a new and wonderful light when she knows one well enough to say anything of her thoughts about God, and death, and such subjects as underlie all other thoughts and words. Such intercourse is rather 'aweful' to me: one's own nature comes out so poor and mean in the new light thus thrown on it." The manifest sincerity of the statement makes it moving. Dodgson does not claim intimacy in this instance, but he knows what intimacy means; it involves for him the possibility of discussing his deepest concerns with someone of utterly different perspective. Scrupulous never to urge a child

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toward more expressiveness, more freedom than she wished, Dodgson throve on the freedom and expressiveness he found in his young companions.

With them he communicated largely through fantasy. Writing to an eleven-year-old whom he has not yet met, in the voice of Lewis Carroll, he speaks of his pleasure at being sent love by someone of whose existence he has not known. "In *some* ways, you know, people that *don't* exist, are much nicer than people that *do*. For instance, people that *don't* exist are never *cross*: and they never *contradict* you: and *they never tread on your toes*! Oh, they're *ever* so much nicer than people that *do* exist! However, never mind: you can't help existing, you know; and I daresay you're *just* as nice as if you didn't." People that don't exist, people and pseudo-people, like the pigs and kittens that populate the nonsense-letters, offer great satisfaction to Lewis Carroll. He can manipulate them for his own purposes. They never tread on his toes. "Yours half-fiction-ately, Lewis Carroll," he signs a letter. In it, he has allowed himself considerable freedom. "May I ask you what young ladies are *for*? If they *don't* keep their promises, and if they *don't* make themselves useful, what in the world is the good of them? Far better have a set of really useful fire-screens, or wheel-barrows." In the half-fiction-ate world he loves to inhabit, he can express anger in ruthless transformations and violent imaginings. Tears abound in the nonsense letters, weeping pug-dogs, children, kittens, grown men. Beds fit in portmanteaus, where children can be stuffed as well. Difficulties about identity frequently surface. Lewis Carroll has confusing interchanges with Charles Dodgson; "me," "myself," and "I" meet on a street; a soldier metamorphoses into the Duke of Wellington who in turn becomes Charles Dodgson—because, like *Duke*, he starts with a *D*; a cat takes Lewis Carroll for a mouse and a mouse takes him for a cat and a horse takes him for a cart and a cart takes him for a horse. People profit from lessons in forgetting until they forget to pay the fee for them. Dogs make puns in French. Fiction, or half-fiction—fiction illuminating fact—proves much more fun than sober truth. The Carroll letters convey the sheer pleasure of play, but also of a kind of code communication. This man who doesn't exist, Lewis Carroll, himself a half-fiction, shares with the young the secret that one can say anything, given fantasy's disguises.

In the context of the letters as a whole, the excursions into nonsense, like the acrostics and cryptographs and word games, define themselves as significant acts of communication: communication through concealment. Isolated from this setting, as in *Lewis Carroll's Bedside Book*, they become trivial.[4] Edgar Cuthwellis—described on the dustjacket as a distant cousin of Lewis Carroll's and owner of Carroll's nightcap—has assembled word games, logic problems, fancies about ghosts, advice about food and letter writing, an account of the nyctograph (Dodgson's device for writing in the dark), into a small compendium for insomniacs, with bits of his

[4] LEWIS CARROLL'S BEDSIDE BOOK, edited by *Edgar Cuthwellis*. Houghton Mifflin. $4.95.

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own linking prose in Carroll's manner. The result proves harmless but meaningless.

The letters, however difficult they make it to ascertain their import, never sound meaningless. Like the photographs, they insist on the complexity of the consciousness behind them. Producing decorous representations of naked children and suggestive images of clothed ones, writing nonsense about profound concerns (identity, sorrow, love, rage), treating the purchase of wine as a moral issue, penning thousands of letters without describing directly his outer or his inner life, defying his biographer even to locate the important moments in his experience, presenting himself as over-meticulous don while indulging as alter-ego an extravagant fantasist, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson remains triumphantly mysterious.

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MARVIN MUDRICK

Boswell's Johnson

JOHNSON REACTS WITH A BANG or merely broods, he doesn't dispose his efforts for the sake of sustained effects, he's a great writer only when he hasn't time to think. His sufficient provocation is any mass of particulars that will take his mind quite off itself: the words of his Dictionary demanding their definitions and illustrative citations; the *Lives of the Poets* compelling him to produce assessments of a miscellany of poems by his subjects and make practical inquiries in search of data, recollections, gossip, anecdote, "something to say [as he observes in a letter to Mrs. Thrale] about men of whom I know nothing but their verses, and sometimes very little of them"; Shakespeare's text, for which Johnson, assembling his edition of it, has to work up his explanatory notes that from the day they were published have constituted the one readable book of Shakespeare commentary; or, best of all, conversation, in which, though the topics may be general, at all events his cronies are such specific and irresistible quarry that he can run them down ("toss and gore" them, says Boswell) without even resorting to pen and paper:

> Talking of our feeling for the distresses of others;—JOHNSON. "Why, Sir, there is much noise made about it, but it is greatly exaggerated. No, Sir, we have a certain degree of feeling to prompt us to do good: more than that, Providence does not intend. It would be misery to no purpose." BOSWELL. "But suppose now, Sir, that one of your intimate friends were apprehended for an offence for which he might be hanged." JOHNSON. "I should do what I could to bail him, and give him any other assistance; but if he were once fairly hanged, I should not suffer." BOSWELL. "Would you eat your dinner that day, Sir?" JOHNSON. "Yes, Sir; and eat it as if he were eating it with me. Why, there's Baretti, who is to be tried for his life to-morrow, friends have risen up for him on every side; yet if he should be hanged, none of them will eat a slice of plumb-pudding the less. Sir, that sympathetic feeling goes a very little way in depressing the mind."

At this moment Johnson may well be ready for a change or a tea break, but crafty Boswell has the trick of converting Johnson's full stops into semicolons:

> I told him that I had dined lately at Foote's, who shewed me a letter which he had received from Tom Davies, telling him that he had not been able to sleep from the concern which he felt on account of "*This sad affair of Baretti*," begging of him to try if he could suggest any thing that might be of service; and, at the same time, recommending to him

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> an industrious young man who kept a pickle-shop. JOHNSON. "Ay, Sir, here you have a specimen of human sympathy; a friend hanged, and a cucumber pickled. We know not whether Baretti or the pickle-man has kept Davies from sleep; nor does he know himself. And as to his not sleeping, Sir; Tom Davies is a very great man; Tom has been upon the stage, and knows how to do those things. I have not been upon the stage, and cannot do those things." BOSWELL. "I have often blamed myself, Sir, for not feeling for others as sensibly as many say they do." JOHNSON. "Sir, don't be duped by them any more. You will find these very feeling people are not very ready to do you good. They *pay* you by *feeling*."

"Clear your mind of cant," Johnson advises Boswell on another occasion; and Boswell's Johnson is the world's champion cant-detector, cant being the payment in full by such counterfeits of feeling as for example, when his mind has gone numb under the weight of moral responsibility, the rolling Johnsonian period that fails to conceal a total lapse of attention: "every mind, however vigorous or abstracted, is necessitated by its present state of union to receive its information and execute its purposes by the intervention of the body," intones the Rambler, public monitor and scold, sicklied o'er with the pale cast of platitude, having to crank out one more weekly essay, indulging his weakness and sickness of spirit, the same mind abstracted and dim that in a tavern or a drawing-room turns privately vigorous and incandescent. Nonetheless literary criticism, which seldom allows itself to be confused by fact, not only rates Johnson's writing above his conversation (Boswell is overrated; conversation is overrated; art is long, people are short) but of course prefers what he writes when, revered and uncomprehended sage of the age, he's delivering his Augustan quota of cant or any of those desperate and tautological formulations that struggle up *de profundis*—

> So few of the hours of life are filled with objects adequate to the mind of man, and so frequently are we in want of present pleasure or employment, that we are forced to have recourse every moment to the past and future for supplemental satisfactions, and relieve the vacuities of our being by recollection of former passages, or anticipation of events to come.

—"an idea," asserts J. P. Hardy with stunning disregard for Boswell's, Mrs. Thrale's, the Club's, Shakespeare's, the Dictionary's, the Lives of the Poets' Johnson, "that permeates the whole of Johnson's experience of life."[1]

Indeed *The Rambler*, as Hardy enthusiastically reminds us by means of his altogether representative quotations, when it isn't cant is a thesaurus of nullifying words and ideas—vacancy, vacuity, tediousness, boredom,

[1] SAMUEL JOHNSON: A CRITICAL STUDY, by *J. P. Hardy.* Routledge & Kegan Paul. $19.95.

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disappointment—that, whether or not they spill the beans about life, whether or not they may be said to permeate the experience of anybody we'd make a detour to seek acquaintance with, suggest a kind of life and outlook that nobody in his right mind would freely choose (so isn't Hardy's Great Moralist wasting his time? because he'd be better off with a carrot and a stick): "the completion of almost every wish is found a disappointment"; "the vacuities of our being"; "to be idle is to be vitious"; "We are in danger of whatever can get possession of our thoughts"; "his heart vacant, and his desires, for want of external objects, ravaging itself"; "Irregular desires will produce licentious practices; what men allow themselves to wish they will soon believe, and will be at last incited to execute what they please themselves with contriving"; "I have often thought those happy that have been fixed from the first dawn of thought, in a determination to some state of life, by the choice of one whose authority may preclude caprice"; "the natural flights of the human mind are not from pleasure to pleasure, but from hope to hope"; "The greater part of mankind are corrupt in every condition, and differ in high and in low stations, only as they have more or fewer opportunities of gratifying their desires, or as they are more or less restrained by human censures." Such "skepticism," Hardy contends, is "bracingly astringent," no doubt like a styptic pencil for a case of hemophilia.

But it isn't *The Rambler* that (according to Hardy) is Johnson's masterpiece, it's *Rasselas*, which "has something quintessential about it. . . . Ideas found elsewhere, especially in *The Rambler,* are here assimilated and transformed; *Rasselas* is, at one and the same time, both antiromantic and yet strangely optimistic. Most often quoted is the remark that 'human life is everywhere a state in which much is to be endured and little to be enjoyed'; nevertheless, the book's overall movement is, even so, surprisingly buoyant." Maybe so, or even so. Here is Hardy's summary of the beginning of *Rasselas* (Hardy's own book is useful mainly as a set of reliable summaries of Johnson's writings): "Every year, during the visitation of the emperor, the inhabitants of the Happy Valley are 'required to propose whatever might contribute to make seclusion pleasant, to fill up the vacancies of attention, and lessen the tediousness of time,' and since all that is desired is 'immediately granted,' they are therefore deprived of the opportunity of still hoping for something. Paradoxically, in this consists the boredom. . . . " Paradoxically, life is hard cheese and full of holes.

"I can discover within me," muses Rasselas, "no power of perception which is not glutted with its proper pleasure, yet I do not feel myself delighted"; and, "resolved to escape from his confinement," he passes another "four months in resolving to lose no more time in idle resolves" ("The vocabulary of 'resolving,' " exults Hardy, "is given in *Rasselas* a richly ironic meaning"). Education and travel don't help: "the more we enquire, the less we can resolve." Advice from "a wise and happy man," a Stoic philosopher he has a session with, doesn't help: "Despite . . . the philosopher's claim that happiness is 'in everyone's power,' Rasselas next meets him a broken man, utterly inconsolable at the death of his only daughter" (a presumably rich irony from which Hardy draws the con-

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clusion that "*Rasselas*, then, is not moral allegory in any simple sense"). There's nothing to life except going round and round the vicious circle: "The hope of happiness is so strongly impressed that the longest experience is not able to efface it. Of the present state, whatever it be, we feel, and are forced to confess, the misery, yet, when the same state is again at a distance, imagination paints it as desirable": misery, self-delusion, misery, self-delusion, misery, etc. So much for Johnson's strangely optimistic and surprisingly buoyant little book. What critics can't ever let themselves think is that for Johnson there isn't any general or philosophical notion at all that bears thinking about and the sooner he stops thinking about it the better: e.g. Hardy vastly admires a characteristic line in Johnson's poem *London*, "Slow rises worth, by poverty depress'd," and doesn't notice that, far from carrying its meaning of soberly qualified hope (or rising to a pitch of triumph at its rhyme-word as, if it were Pope's, it would surely have done), it's a bottom line that droops funereally and declines at last into just what it's alleged to have overcome. There's nothing good or bad but thinking makes it worse. In the *Life of Johnson* Boswell reports an encounter between Johnson and a retired solicitor named Oliver Edwards, who haven't seen each other since they were at Oxford in Pembroke College forty-nine years earlier: Edwards is a friendly and artless soul pleased to be talking with his now renowned old fellow-collegian, to whom at length it occurs to him to tell an inadvertent home truth—"You are a philosopher, Dr. Johnson. I have tried too in my time to be a philosopher; but, I don't know how, cheerfulness was always breaking in." "A cheerful disposition," Rasselas ought to have said, "is more precious than rubies."

For Johnson philosophy is the anticipation of the void, the terror of indiscrimination, all things confounded in their general fate. He dreaded any talk or thought of death: he told Boswell that "he never had a moment in which death was not terrible to him," and "So much . . . [is the fear of death natural to man] that the whole of life is but keeping away thoughts of it" (when Edwards casually remarks that "we are old men now" Johnson, who "never liked to think of being old," will have none of it—"Don't let us discourage one another"). He knows at every moment the propinquity, threatening to collapse into identity, of Baretti dead and Davies sodden with grief, a man hanged and a cucumber pickled, which so long as they can be kept separate permit, if not always cheerfulness, at least a certain poise and sympathy in the act of naming and distinguishing and enumerating:

> [Pope's] stature was so low that, to bring him to a level with common tables, it was necessary to raise his seat. But his face was not displeasing, and his eyes were animated and vivid. . . .
>
> Most of what can be told concerning his petty peculiarities was communicated by a female domestick of the Earl of Oxford, who knew him perhaps after the middle of life. He was then so weak as to stand in perpetual need of female attendance; extremely sensible of cold, so that he wore a kind of fur doublet under a shirt of very coarse warm linen with

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fine sleeves. When he rose he was invested in a boddice made of stiff canvass, being scarce able to hold himself erect till they were laced, and he then put on a flannel waistcoat. One side was contracted. His legs were so slender that he enlarged their bulk with three pairs of stockings, which were drawn on and off by the maid; for he was not able to dress or undress himself, and neither went to bed nor rose without help. His weakness made it very difficult for him to be clean.

His hair had fallen almost all away, and he used to dine sometimes with Lord Oxford, privately, in a velvet cap. His dress of ceremony was black, with a tye-wig and a little sword.

(That "little sword" strikes both ways, for Johnson was an afflicted man of uncouth manners and convulsive bodily movements, he knew as well as Pope did what it meant to be an object of pity and an oddity. Even when in company he had a habit of talking to himself, according to Boswell "frequently uttering pious ejaculations": "His friend Mr. Thomas Davies"—of pickle fame—"of whom Churchill says 'That Davies hath a very pretty wife,' when Dr. Johnson muttered 'lead us not into temptation,' used with waggish and gallant humour to whisper Mrs. Davies, 'You, my dear, are the cause of this.' " Johnson was a man of such inspiriting wit as to be, even when deep in his affliction, the cause of such wit in others.)

Johnson is a great biographer and a great critic not because as the Age of Reason's chosen exemplar he's a saltmine of lugubrious commonplaces but because, when he has the job of dealing with particulars, he faithfully attends to them, for instance he feels no obligation to misrepresent them or play down their differences for the sake of imputing consistency or unadulterated virtue to his subjects. Poets are vain like other men; evidence doesn't have to be sunk in homage; poems are more or less skilful performances, if they can be revelations they can also be the upshot and repository of ungenerous impulses:

[Pope] shewed his satirical powers by publishing *The Dunciad,* one of his greatest and most elaborate performances, in which he endeavoured to sink into contempt all the writers by whom he had been attacked, and some others whom he thought unable to defend themselves.

At the head of the Dunces he placed poor Theobald, whom he accused of ingratitude, but whose real crime was supposed to be that of having revised Shakespeare more happily than himself. . . .

The prevalence of this poem was gradual and slow: the plan, if not wholly new, was little understood by common readers. Many of the allusions required illustration; the names were often expressed only by the initial and final letters, and, if they had been printed at length, were such as few had known or recollected. The subject itself had nothing generally interesting; for whom did it concern to know that one or another scribbler was a dunce? If therefore it had been possible for those who were attacked to conceal their pain and their resentment, *The Dunciad* might have made its way very slowly in the world.

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Poems aren't necessarily improved, though they may be recommended to puzzle-solving readers, by their deviations from rational discourse; poets are sometimes not only no wiser than other men but neither rational nor learned; at any rate evidence is always there to be called upon, as on another occasion when, not writing a formal biography but talking among friends, Johnson with a few touches of evidence recreates to the life in this model of rational discourse another celebrated poet:

> ". . . Goldsmith had no settled notions upon any subject; so he talked always at random. It seemed to be his intention to blurt out whatever was in his mind, and see what would become of it. He was angry too, when catched in an absurdity; but it did not prevent him from falling into another the next minute. I remember Chamier, after talking with him for some time, said, 'Well, I do believe he wrote . . . [*The Traveller*] himself: and let me tell you, that is believing a great deal.' Chamier once asked him, what he meant by *slow,* the last word in the first line of *The Traveller,* 'Remote, unfriended, melancholy, slow.' Did he mean tardiness of locomotion? Goldsmith, who would say something without consideration, answered, 'Yes.' I was sitting by, and said, 'No, Sir; you do not mean tardiness of locomotion; you mean, that sluggishness of mind which comes upon a man in solitude.' Chamier believed then that I had written the line as much as if he had seen me write it. Goldsmith, however, was a man, who, whatever he wrote, did it better than any other man could do. He deserved a place in Westminster-Abbey, and every year he lived, would have deserved it better. He had, indeed, been at no pains to fill his mind with knowledge. He transplanted it from one place to another; and it did not settle in his mind; so he could not tell what was in his own books."

Johnson (in Boswell's memorandum of the conversation) is turning the evidence into one of his innumerable offhand and beautiful models of rational discourse: his "superiority over other learned men," as Boswell sums it up, "consisted chiefly in . . . a certain continual power of seizing the useful substance of all that he knew, and exhibiting it in a clear and forceful manner; so that knowledge, which we often see to be no better than lumber in men of dull understanding, was, in him, true, evident, and actual wisdom." There have been many men of dull understanding who have called Boswell foolish.

Johnson is wise, Boswell foolish; Johnson warns and abstains, Boswell plunges; Johnson talks away, Boswell transcribes for posterity; Johnson is rather a great man writing than a great writer, Boswell is a great writer and an ordinary man; and they are two of a kind, abysmal melancholics and compulsive socializers, afraid of solitude, afraid of death and dissolution, victims of themselves, meant for each other, needing each other, needing evidence and arguments (Boswell is a lawyer, Johnson judicially dictates to him some of his briefs), making beautiful models of rational discourse out of the useful substance of all they know, as when after a dozen years of marriage Boswell confides to his journal his deliberate judgment of his wife:

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> I made a good many excerpts from *Tom Jones.* My Wife disliked Feilding's [sic] turn for low life, as I have observed yesterday. But it is human nature. She has nothing of that english juiciness of mind of which I have a great deal, which makes me delight in humour. But what hurts me more, she has nothing of that warmth of imagination which produces the pleasures of vanity and many others, and which is even a considerable cause of religious fervour. *Family,* which is a high *principle* in my mind, and Genealogy, which is to me an interesting amusement, have no effect upon her. It is impossible not to be both uneasy and a little angry at such defects, (or call them differences;) and at times they make me think that I have been unlucky in wasting myself with one, who, instead of cherishing my genius, is perpetually checking it. But on the other hand, I consider her excellent sense, her penetration, her knowledge of real life, her activity, her genuine affection, her generous conduct to me during my distracted love for her and when she married me, and her total disinterestedness and freedom from every species of selfishness during all the time she has been my Wife. And then I value her and am fond of her, and am pained to the heart for having ever behaved in a manner unworthy of her merit. I also consider that a Woman of the same imagination with myself might have encouraged me in whim and adventure, and hurried me to Ridicule and perhaps ruin, whereas my excellent Spouse's prudence has kept me out of many follies, and made my life much more decent and creditable than it would have been without her.

But later the same day he makes an entry that shows that she too sees the skull beneath the skin: "She has allways a dreary terrour for death. . . . She said yesterday it was desireable to live long for one reason: because old people [though, as it happened, not Johnson in old age] come to be as little affraid of death as children are." Pope can conclude *The Dunciad* with the glorious striding verses that register the end of everything—

> Lo! thy dread Empire, CHAOS! is restor'd;
> Light dies before thy uncreating word;
> Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall,
> And universal Darkness buries All.

—because for Pope (after the spite and dullness that have preceded and that Johnson authoritatively points out) this is, thank God! the tremendous end of the poem, and he can rejoice at having completed his performance; but for Johnson and Boswell life itself is the only performance, the function of words is to commemorate it, completing it is not to be thought of, death is the end which images of death prefigure too staringly to be borne ("I saw death so staringly waiting for all the human race," Boswell sets down in his journal, "and had such a cloudy and dark prospect beyond it, that I was miserable as far as I had animation"); and one part of *The Dunciad* that Johnson doesn't discuss is the end.

Johnson and Boswell are never superficial or trivial, because, some events looming too large for comfort, no event is too small or idiosyncratic

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to concentrate their attention. "Nothing is too little for so little a creature as man," says Johnson, advising his biographer-elect to take note of every particular, and Boswell gladly complies:

> On Friday, March 31, [1775,] I supped with him and some friends at a tavern. One of the company attempted, with too much forwardness, to rally him on his late appearance at the theatre; but had reason to repent of his temerity. "Why, Sir, did you go to Mrs. Abington's benefit? Did you see?" JOHNSON. "No, Sir." "Did you hear?" JOHNSON. "No Sir." "Why then, Sir, did you go?" JOHNSON. "Because, Sir, she is a favourite of the publick; and when the publick cares the thousandth part for you that it does for her, I will go to your benefit too."

Or the very next paragraph in the *Life*:

> Next morning I won a small bet from Lady Diana Beauclerk, by asking him as to one of his particularities, which her Ladyship laid I durst not do. It seems he had been frequently observed at the Club to put into his pocket the Seville oranges, after he had squeezed the juice of them into the drink which he made for himself. Beauclerk and Garrick talked of it to me, and seemed to think that he had a strange unwillingness to be discovered. We could not divine what he did with them; and this was the bold question to be put. I saw on his table the spoils of the preceding night, some fresh peels nicely scraped and cut into pieces. "O, Sir, (said I,) I now partly see what you do with the squeezed oranges which you put into your pocket at the Club." JOHNSON. "I have a great love for them." BOSWELL. "And pray, Sir, what do you do with them? You scrape them, it seems, very neatly, and what next?" JOHNSON. "Let them dry, Sir." BOSWELL. "And what next?" JOHNSON. "Nay, Sir, you shall know their fate no further." BOSWELL. "Then the world must be left in the dark. It must be said (assuming a mock solemnity,) he scraped them, and let them dry, but what he did with them next, he never could be prevailed upon to tell." JOHNSON. "Nay, Sir, you should say it more emphatically:—he could not be prevailed upon, even by his dearest friends, to tell."

A man not to be trifled with, a good man, not a wit but a powerful mind penetrated with wit, a man with many friends and strong affections, the obstreperous hero of the comedy of life:

> [Johnson] charged Mr. Langton with what he thought want of judgement upon an interesting occasion. "When I was ill, (said he,) I desired he would tell me sincerely in what he thought my life was faulty. Sir, he brought me a sheet of paper, on which he had written down several texts of Scripture, recommending christian charity. And when I questioned him what occasion I had given for such an animadversion, all that he could say amounted to this,—that I sometimes contradicted people in conversation. Now what harm does it do to any man to be

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> contradicted?" BOSWELL. "I suppose he meant the *manner* of doing it; roughly,—and harshly." JOHNSON. "And who is the worse for that?" BOSWELL. "It hurts people of weak nerves." JOHNSON. "I know no such weak-nerved people." Mr. Burke, to whom I related this conference, said, "It is well, if when a man comes to die, he has nothing heavier upon his conscience than having been a little rough in conversation."
>
> Johnson, at the time when the paper was presented to him, though at first pleased with the attention of his friend, whom he thanked in an earnest manner, soon exclaimed, in a loud and angry tone, "What is your drift, Sir?" Sir Joshua Reynolds pleasantly observed, that it was a scene for a comedy, to see a penitent get into a violent passion and belabour his confessor.

Cheerfulness can be the gift of the gods, or it can be a gift of love from a man whose very unreasonableness is a sign of his indispensable presence.

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THOMAS R. SMITH

Opening a Literary Time Capsule

THE ACADEMIC REVIVAL OF WYNDHAM LEWIS seems fully under way. 1978 saw the publication of two full-length scholarly bibliographies of Lewis' writings; a new study of Eliot, Pound, and Lewis by Timothy Materer has recently been published under the title *Vortex*; and a new biography by Jeffrey Meyers is in the works. Previously uncollected stories by Lewis have now found their way into print, and Lewis' name is now more frequently mentioned in reviews and articles as a figure important to twentieth-century literature. Perhaps this resurgence of interest confirms the much-heralded shift to the right that glossy magazines tell us is going on in our midst. Could Wyndham Lewis become a patron saint of academic neoconservatism? Certainly not if Fredric Jameson's version of Lewis in his new book[1] is taken as hagiography.

Jameson, the author of studies of Marxist literary theory (*Marxism and Form*, 1971) and structuralist theory (*The Prison-House of Language*, 1972), has turned his considerable theoretical and analytic skills to the work of one author in *Fables of Aggression*. That he has chosen Lewis may seem at first odd: what possible affinity can Jameson have with one of the more blatantly right-wing of literary modernists? But it is precisely the political cast of Lewis' work that makes it congenial to Jameson. He takes as his subject Lewis' "political unconscious"; he restricts his concern to the novels, for his Lewis is primarily a political novelist; and most tellingly, he sees Lewis' idiosyncratic position among his fellow modernists as providing a fresh view of modernism, opposed to a thoroughly institutionalized, "hegemonic," "canonical," "classical" modernism supposedly enshrined in universities and in society at large. Since Lewis has been largely ignored by literary critics, reading his work becomes a sort of time-trip into the literary past:

> The neglect of Lewis is thus a happy accident for us, who can then, as from out of a time capsule, once more sense that freshness and virulence of modernizing stylization less and less accessible in the faded texts of his contemporaries.

So, Lewis is to be read to give ourselves an authentic taste of what the great modernist texts felt like to their first readers. Fair enough, but this time capsule has another purpose. For Jameson, Lewis' attacks on modernism in the twenties and later conform in many ways to the "contemporary poststructuralist aesthetic, which signals the dissolution of the mod-

[1] FABLES OF AGGRESSION: Wyndham Lewis, The Modernist as Fascist, by *Fredric Jameson*. University of California Press. $11.95.

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ernist paradigm. . . . " Jameson draws Lewis' work part way into "some new, properly postmodernist or schizophrenic conception of the cultural artifact—now strategically reformulated as 'text' or 'écriture,' and stressing discontinuity, allegory, the mechanical, the gap between signifier and signified, the lapse in meaning, the syncope in the experience of the subject." Though Jameson admits the anachronism in aligning Lewis with the "contemporary textual aesthetic," he insists strongly on Lewis' relevance for our "postindividualistic" cultural moment. Oddly, then, Lewis is taken out of the ranks of his fellow modernists and valued now for the reason he has customarily been ignored or apologized for—his intransigent, "oppositional" stance toward modernism. Along with these academic-political reasons, Jameson's more conventional motives for reading and writing about Lewis are that he is "among the most richly inventive of modern British writers" and that his work merits "unapologetic rediscovery and can sustain enthusiastic reading as well as the closest critical scrutiny."

Jameson focuses on how Lewis reimagined the world after World War I. Setting *Tarr* (1918, rev. 1928) on one side of what he calls the "break" in Lewis' literary career, Jameson constructs an elaborately theoretical analysis of that novel and then shows how the terms in which it is imagined change radically in the twenties and after. The main fixture of Jameson's analysis of the novels is the "libidinal apparatus," defined as a psychic energy model or, more complicatedly, "an empty form or structural matrix in which a charge of free-floating and inchoate fantasy—both ideological and psychoanalytic—can suddenly crystallize, and find the articulated figuration essential for its social actuality and psychic effectivity." Presumably this apparatus is a psychological structure remaining potential and unrealized until invested with the psychological, political, or ideological fantasies necessary to bring about a work of art. By means of the apparatus, Jameson interprets *Tarr* as a "national allegory," a bringing to life in Lewis' imagination of the "objective configuration of the political history of pre-1914 Europe." Of course, Lewis' own emphasis on the national background of *Tarr's* main characters—each significantly English, German, Russian, Russo-German, or Polish—encourages a loosely allegorical reading, but Jameson's definition of allegory is more specific. In *Tarr* and *The Magic Mountain*,

> . . . narrative meaning becomes relational, as momentary alliances develop and disintegrate. . . . allegory ceases to be that static decipherment of one-on-one correspondences with which it is still so often identified and opens up that specific and uniquely allegorical space between signifier and signified, in which "the signifier is what represents the subject for another signifier" . . . the allegorical signified of such narratives is ultimately always World War I, or Apocalypse: not in any punctual prediction or reflection of this conflict as a chronological event, but rather as the ultimate conflictual "truth" of the sheer, mobile, shifting relationality of national types and of the older nation-states which are their content.

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I don't know of any intelligent reader who supposes allegory to be a simple decoding of one-on-one correspondences, but that straw man is less important to Jameson's point than his seeing *Tarr* as an allegory of shifting power relations among pre-1914 European nations.

Jameson also submits *Tarr* to a structuralist analysis that comes close to accounting for its disappointingly weak ending. According to Jameson, the moody and violent German, Kreisler, can be seen as freeing Tarr from his romantic responsibilities to the lumpish "bourgeois-bohemian" Bertha by means of an exchange of partners: Tarr takes over Kreisler's place as suitor to Anastasya, a svelte, intellectual Russo-German, while Kreisler takes up with Bertha, thereby liberating Tarr from his suffocating relationship with her. Thus,

> . . . to see Kreisler as Tarr's life-surrogate is to be able to grasp the peculiarly *fin de siècle* or Gidean flourish of Tarr's concluding gesture: to marry Bertha *because* she bears the dead Kreisler's child amounts to a ratification of the structural substitution, and a reciprocal repayment for Kreisler's liberation of Tarr himself.

Nonetheless, Jameson is aware of the unsatisfactoriness of *Tarr*'s ending despite his interpretation, and he takes Lewis' difficulty in closing off the novel to represent an impasse for the libidinal apparatus *Tarr* embodies. That impasse signals the break in Lewis' career, after which a new libidinal apparatus appears, energized by tensions resulting from the new "transnational" forces of Communism and Fascism that displace the old diplomatic power struggles as "objective preconditions" necessary but not sufficient for Lewis' writing.

One result of this altered imagination of the world, Jameson asserts, is "the eclipse of the place of the subject or ego . . . the placeless observer [like Tarr] 'out of life and out of sex' who now finds himself irresistibly politicized, drawn into the force field of the ideologies and the instincts and transformed beyond recognition." The isolated self struggling to transcend itself in *Tarr* disappears in Lewis' later work like *The Childermass* (1928), whose

> new vision displaces the crisis of the self, and, by discrediting these masses of what Tarr called the "second-rate" [the insubstantial "peons" of *The Childermass*], generates the mirage of a positive counterterm . . . the ideological valorization of the "strong personality" itself. Now the attention of characters and reader alike is directed to the pursuit of this ideal, and the dead are ultimately judged on the degree of individual reality, or "personality," they have managed to acquire in life.

At this point in his account of the career, Jameson brings in Lewis' satire on the mechanical aspect of human behavior in *The Wild Body* stories (1927), which "begin to abstract a new narrative system from the post-individualistic realities of collective work and group *praxis*. . . . " What

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Jameson has forgotten is that these stories represent some of Lewis' earliest writing, from the years 1909–1912, reworked and collected in one volume. To be sure, *The Wild Body* stories are an important aspect of Lewis' work in the twenties since they show his absorption in the sheer externality of human life as a source of satire, but their affinities with Lewis' earliest artistic efforts, including *Tarr*, are ignored by Jameson's simply grouping them with Lewis' post-World War I writing.

The book closes with several chapters devoted to charting the operations of the second, Communism-Fascism libidinal apparatus in Lewis' later novels, mainly *The Revenge for Love* (1937), *Self Condemned* (1954), and the last two volumes of *The Human Age* (1955). Here Jameson's structuralist approach sometimes allows him to make enlightening connections among Lewis' novels. For example, the following passage dealing with *The Revenge for Love* receives some surprising support from Lewis himself for Jameson's allegorical reading of *Tarr*:

> Nor can Victor [a central character in *The Revenge for Love*] really be considered a new and positive figure for Lewis . . . . Victor must be seen as the . . . unexpected avatar of the old Kreisler-id. Unlike Tarr, Victor is the very prototype of the *bad* artist; like Kreisler, he is an outsider, and as an Australian emits the signal of some strenuous and predominantly physical existence. "His attitude toward the world," one of the characters tells us, "is what, if he were a Great Power, would be called typically that of the *Have-Not*—I use the current jargon of the press. . . . Victor, I think, suffers from an inferiority—complex. . . . Oh, yes. Victor is very like Germany!" (*RL*, 224). Yet Victor has none of the violent and self-destructive characteristics that made Kreisler such a striking figure: his structural position as the Pariah—the combination of Strength and Non-Intelligence—rather marks him out for the role of the sacrificial victim.

And sacrificed he is, in the Pyrenees, while unknowingly running guns over the Spanish border.

Readers will find much to complain about in Jameson's style. He is fond of impressive polysyllables and needlessly convoluted syntax: I found one sentence (the last on page 38) absolutely impenetrable. But the book repays the often painstaking effort Jameson requires of his readers to follow his theoretical arguments. Those arguments, rather than Lewis' novels, their ostensible subject, are the heart of the book. Jameson has lit upon Lewis as a writer through whom to try to develop a thoroughgoing model of criticism sensitive to the latest findings of structuralist, post-structuralist, and Marxist literary and political theory. He is unconcerned with evaluating Lewis' works, leaving previous critical judgments where he found them. Thus, *The Revenge for Love* is still Lewis' best novel; *Self Condemned* is still "the most desolate," but powerful nonetheless; and the experimentalism of *Tarr* is still a dead end. *The Human Age* receives extended, serious treatment and is usefully classified as "theological science fiction."

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It should be noted that Jameson has incorporated his article "Wyndham Lewis as Futurist" (THE HUDSON REVIEW, Vol. XXVI, No. 2) with minor revisions into the first four chapters of *Fables of Aggression*, where he treats Lewis' prose style. The bulk of the book, however, is new and may serve to start a new critical debate with Lewis at its center: not, I suspect, among devoted readers of Lewis, but among critics and theorists interested in seeing how the most theoretical of literary, psychological, and political formulations can be made to bear upon the career and texts of a single writer.

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EMILY GROSHOLZ

Poetry Chronicle

THE CRITIC'S DILEMMA THESE DAYS is that the very criteria of judgment are themselves choosable. At the very least, then, we should try to make clear the basis on which we dismiss or admire books of poetry. In the initial part of this Chronicle, I would like to criticize a certain strain of contemporary American poetry, referring to works by three poets, perhaps unfairly singled out, since they are no worse and probably better than many of their peers; here my argument depends only on a few simple observations concerning the English language and A. J. Ayer. Further on, I will offer more principled grounds of judgment to explain my admiration for a variety of poetry books which have recently appeared.

Consider the following selections: from "Sparrows," by Bruce Weigl[1]

> Yes it was raining the day we wrecked the convertible.
> I pretended to sleep while you led us home
> across a large body of water.
> You must have carried me
> or pulled me on my back by my chin—
> I can float but can't swim.
> I woke at your father's house.

—from "Late Morning," by John Allman[2]

> So I do not get up. I avoid myself,
> sheathed in blankets like an Indian
> woman. I roll over, an old drunk,
> I hear myself breathing the deep,
> stertorous dreams in which I succeed,
> saying, "Nothing matters."

—and from "The Blind Man," by Carl Dennis[3]

> I don't need this blindness to remind me.
> For a long time my backbone curved to hospitals.
> I'm familiar with the bone wards.
> No need for all my papers and pencils
> To fall dark. Did I ever pretend
> My sentences had saved anything?

[1] A ROMANCE, by *Bruce Weigl.* University of Pittsburgh Press. $8.95.
[2] WALKING FOUR WAYS IN THE WIND, by *John Allman.* Princeton University Press. $8.50.
[3] SIGNS AND WONDERS, by *Carl Dennis.* Princeton University Press. $8.50.

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This poetry is marked by a use of the first person singular and the present tense (or a past pressed close against it), and a severe parataxis in which nearly all subordinate clauses disappear. Its world-view, if it has one, is a kind of soft phenomenalism, for it is the logical conjunction of sense-data statements, brief reports of the immediate sensory experience of a subject. Forty years ago A. J. Ayer hoped that such conjunction would eventually add up to reports about the world, and these poets seem to share this hope; but it has long been dashed by philosophers with, god knows, no particular stake in poetry.

Why would a poet wish to run so perversely counter to the English language which is, first of all, rich in hypotactic devices? One suggestion is that parataxis leaves transitions ambiguous, thus inviting the reader to take more active part in the construction of the sense of the poem. However, in these poems the sequence is that of a private dream; not even the phenomenalist-poet seems to know why the sentences proceed as they do. Thus parataxis is a tease, and the reader can only fail in his construals.

Secondly, English also provides abundant resources for perspectival play among tenses and persons. Neglect of these is, I suspect, an attempt to give the poem more immediacy, perhaps for enhanced emotional impact. These poems *are* immediate, but in the phenomenalist sense of expressing what is experienced prior to all inference. Unfortunately, at this level it is impossible to distinguish between reality and hallucination. (Thus the diction, though spare, is never chaste, for the conflation of reality and dream generates a slew of shifting figures.) The objective realm is attained only upon imaginative detachment from the subjective "I," when we hypothesize, entertain "contrary-to-fact conditionals," take on another point of view: in fact, indulge in subordination, the third person, the pluperfect, the subjunctive! No one can fail to be moved by reality and the imagination at work in it; but the swivel-eye of immediacy, limited and egotistical, is cold: and so much for emotional impact.

Parataxis, the lyric "I," temporal foreshortening, are all effective when carefully employed, but as invariable components of this sadly widespread style, they amount to a literary mannerism which should be dropped.

Galileo, a poet in his youth, abandoned poetry for the project of mathematical physics. Descartes, preliminary to introducing his mechanical/mathematical *méthode*, argued that we might as well make ourselves familiar with the histories and fables of the ancients, in order to avoid being misled by them. Ever since the locus of truth shifted over to the scientists (Galileo and Descartes on the machines of nature, Hobbes and Locke on the social machine), honest poets have had to wonder about the peculiar status of their song: why go on singing? Hölderlin's famous question, *Wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?*, is prompted by the misgiving that perhaps poetry had a function only in the good old tribal days, when Man, Nature and the Gods were one, and poets could plausibly claim divine inspiration for themselves and truth for their utterances.

The standard I propose for judging contemporary poetry is just this:

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anachronism is useless. Poets who think they sing "to restore this lost unity and to reconcile natural with supernatural, visible with invisible" (as Keeley and Sherrard characterize the poetry of Sikelianos, discussed below) attempt the impossible. Direct appeal to myth, animism, the old unities, betrays a lack of intelligence and nerve.

However, I am far from claiming that poetry no longer serves a purpose. The scientific world-view, insofar as it is (archaically) unreflective, puts us in an absurd position, out of history and out of nature. The luminous *cogito*, to whom the machines of nature are both transparent and alien, and the reasoner who forges the social contract independent of particular customs and traditions, that is, of the past, offer a doom as restrictive as the old unity they attempted to break.

Wozu Dichter? Look around: in a public, shareable way, poets are carrying out a much-needed reflection on our relation to the past and to nature, and on our (thankfully no longer tribal) social unities. Those who repudiate modernity, by trying to restore the mantic role of the poet, simply cannot be taken seriously. The best poets do play upon the archaic functions of poetry within the monolithic world it once governed, but always with an affectionate or bitter irony—for they see that the truth it claimed was never absolute anyway, but a cultural achievement, like science. And their writing exhibits the virtues characteristic of the modern era: the ability to improvise, to entertain, suspend or revise judgment, and to regard what is offered as a foundation as, instead, a problem—a problem which must be taken up and solved again and again.

Eleanor Wilner's first book, *Maya*,[4] is a particularly fine example of such poetry. The poems are in general rather long, but their texture never thins, rewarding the intensest scrutiny. Even more striking than their surface beauty is the deep thoughtfulness which informs them, guiding the reader as a stream or pathway runs from one border to the other in a scroll of, say, Wang Meng, whose works are dynamic, orderly and crowded. It is difficult to disentangle a few lines from the whole, but the following passage from "Love Uncommanded" is representative:

> Extraordinary. Our friends,
> the skeptics, who are
> ourselves, such an extravagance
> of feints, the perfectly spun
> glass, exquisite complications, saying
> they know that they know nothing,
> the oldest ruse. Let it go.
> Say what you know.
>
> For once, be rid of the urn
> with beauty chased in half-relief, the urn
> with the false bottom, the ancient goad
> to truth—the right word turned
> exactly on itself. Say what you know.

[4] MAYA, by *Eleanor Wilner*. University of Massachusetts Press. $8.00.

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Wilner's aversion to the lyric "I" ("After all/ these years of hating/ the first person singular, the one rent/ in the good fabric . . .") turns her to narrative, myths retold and parables invented for our troubled occasions. All kinds of strange and strangely recognizable figures populate her stories: Pharaoh's daughter (Moses' corruptor), Iphigenia (alive and well in a little village), Henry Adams' wife (a fine repose in stone); as well as more indefinite types which poet and reader can use as their mirror, the dead man in the parachute, the retired diamond cutter, the monkey-man climbing the beanstalk of spine to the grey clouds of the brain, that country where giants (who are they?) taunt and comfort him. Or, in "The Illuminator," the monk who admits:

> We are the scribes of the unacknowledged world,
> illuminators of the books we torture
> with profusion: with foliage, flowers, beasts and
> saints in strange positions.

and feels responsible when he sees a cross in a peasant's garden, two bound sticks which, because they are so choked in vines and flowers, remind him of his "T"s.

> That's why I went tonight to see
> that farmer—knocked on his door and said to him:
> forgive me. He stared at me in dumb dismay
> and shook because I seemed a holy man, and mad, to him—
> a little man in a frayed robe, gold-spattered,
> with paint stains on his fingers, apologizing
> for what he couldn't know
> had never mattered.

Throughout the book, Wilner's discourse traces the isomorphisms between the poet's illuminated manuscript ("the language/ made by puncturing/ the page, letting in/ the light"), her own skin ("indelibly marked/ with sun and shade: in safety, ornament;/ in danger, camouflage"), and nature affirmed as "the veil of maya" where

> everything is close to everything, the stars
> hang among the woven branches of the trees,
> the moon is a lantern overgrown with leaves.

Unlike the abstracted mystic who tries to see past maya and succeeds only in seeing nothing, Wilner wants to acknowledge the intricacy, the profusion, the thicket of the world, as well as the line of thought threaded through it.

The genius of modernity is our enhanced ability to acknowledge and control natural contingency: disease, weather, scarcity; but the great uncertainty, death, remains unaltered in the slightest by all our cultural resourcefulness. Poems dealing with death can be taken as a touchstone,

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then, for precisely here we are most tempted to "ritual avoidance," telling tales that transform (mortal) chance to (divine) necessity. It seems we can't help talking about the dead; indeed, given how many elegies are delivered in the second person, we can't help talking *to* the dead. Yet, just as we cannot leave a death uninterpreted and meaningless, the desire for some univocal construction is anachronistic.

The civil war in Ireland has laid a patina of senseless violence over various important political issues (legitimacy, domination, poverty) and the already enigmatic fact of death. It is not surprising that Seamus Heaney's latest book, *Field Work*,[5] includes half a dozen elegies where the expression of loss is woven with a sense of ambiguity, political, moral and personal. In "The Strand at Lough Beg," Heaney mourns his cousin, Colum McCartney, murdered under circumstances left unexplained, on a highway far from home:

> Along that road, a high, bare pilgrim's track
> Where Sweeney fled before the bloodied heads,
> Goat-beards and dogs' eyes in a demon pack
> Blazing out of the ground, snapping and squealing.
> What blazed ahead of you? A faked road-block?
> The red lamp swung, the sudden brakes and stalling
> Engine, voices, heads hooded and the cold-nosed gun?

The myth (Sweeney is the hero of a Middle Irish prose and poem sequence, the *Notes* tell us), set in apposition as a bit of regional lore, conveys brilliantly the horror and mystery of the murder, its inhumanity.

Heaney ends the stanza with a transition back to Lough Beg, where he and his cousin grew up, and begins the next in their childhood, when the spent cartridges of hunter's guns unsettled them, sprung from a family who "Spoke an old language of conspirators/ And could not crack the whip or seize the day." He imagines them both walking across their strand, in an artificial time suspended between childhood and a different version of the recent past:

> I turn because the sweeping of your feet
> Has stopped behind me, to find you on your knees
> With blood and roadside muck in your hair and eyes,
> Then kneel in front of you in brimming grass
> And gather up cold handfuls of the dew
> To wash you, cousin.

Few elegies are at once so brutal, beautiful and sad.

The poet speaks to the dead man, dead even in the imagined scene of the poem; why is apostrophe fitting and indeed inevitable here? Even the witty and mournful elegy "Casualty," narrated in the third person all

[5] FIELD WORK, by *Seamus Heaney*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $8.95.

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through ("He was blown to bits/ Out drinking in a curfew") is wrenched to direct address at the end:

> Dawn-sniffing revenant,
> Plodder through midnight rain,
> Question me again.

For there is no suggestion that the poet believes the dead are not dead; and surely the ear of a dead man is no longer an ear. Here, I believe, is neither anachronism nor self-delusion, but only a genuine paradox.

Field Work as a whole is far from being overshadowed by the question of death; the question of life is also answered and answered again, particularly in a series of lovely, unsentimental and very moving poems to the poet's wife. The title poem ends:

> Mould
> blooms and pigments
> the back of your hand
> like a birthmark—
> my umber one,
> you are stained, stained
> to perfection.

The poem which forms the centerpiece of Pamela Stewart's second book, *Cascades*,[6] was written for (and, again, addressed to) a murdered friend. Towards the end of "Harvest," she takes up the puzzle of direct address:

> Thousands of words are being found for you. They
> Touch the air between our hearts and paper,
> And as they do
> Will you be there to hear them?

Her answer is too simple: she'll go on talking to her dead friend, serving as a conduit between her and the world, in order to let her know what's going on in the lives of those she loved.

> That night when the mothers
> Drive hooded, ghostly children from door
> To door, whiskey flasks between their pretty knees
> To keep off the cold, I'll let you know
> How shadows fall and that *everything* you care for
>
> *Still touches you, and whoever loves you, also!*

Throughout this long, complexly narrated poem, Stewart has made a strong case for the irrationality and injustice of her friend's murder; so

[6] CASCADES, by *Pamela Stewart*. L'Epervier Press. $6.95.

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that the last exclamation is moving because it clearly springs from her deep sense of loss and desire to right the wrong ("I want to give you/ All he said you could not have"). Still, it loses force precisely because it is so naive, as if the dead could be comforted like children.

In this respect, the final poem of the collection, "For February's Dark Simple," where Stewart reflects on the naive stories we tell children about death, which children ultimately see through, is deeper and more effective.

> How, all these years,
> Tucking the white quilt around you was
> A white lie, how the largest feelings
> Force us to know
> We're really all alone. Even now, while the desert
> That circles this town is eating rain,
> Its terrible rim of mountains can shoot
> To color. You're eight years old, curled up
> In a gold chair, furious
> And sad at all the sadness—even as
> We bring it on ourselves.

The key poem in Howard Moss's latest volume[7] is "Elegy for My Sister," a distinguished piece of writing, deeply felt and beautifully structured. It opens by asking, why should we wake the dead by addressing them? Why not let them sleep in our own forgetfulness?

> Why torture myself? or you?—sailed into
> The port of Nothing, or that Elysium
> Of childish happiness the heart sets store by,
> Which, for you, would be a house in Larchmont,
> Or the first time you arrived in Paris.

Thus the figure of the poet's sister is introduced, and with such wry sympathy she continues to develop throughout the poem, moving in and out of the present, where she is lost, the recent past, where she is ill, and her girlhood, where she appears as amateur pianist, romantic, and schoolgirl in the city.

> What errors you made you made in wanting
> To be warm again or held or human
> And not for the wolf of cash, or the mean,
> Sloe-eyed beauty of power or the game
> Of the wily outwitting the unaware,
> Or simulated pain used as a lure.

The schoolgirl pauses to watch a drawbridge open, dwarfed in a city riverscape and identified with it through an artificial but convincing

[7] NOTES FROM THE CASTLE, by *Howard Moss*. Atheneum. $10.00.

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trope, which in turn the poet uses to develop his own meditation upon illness and the way it moves those we love towards death. A barge passes, whose scruffy captain we recognize at the end as Charon; the opening bridge, like a diseased body, "is ever so slightly/ Tearing a suture of itself in secret;/ And what is most feared is about to happen."

But our disintegrating orders are orderings nonetheless, and the one-sided love we retain for the absent is still love. A philosophical passage towards the end of the poem, abstract but not cold, brings together all of the poem's figures and reflections:

> What are ideas but architecture
> Taking nature to heart and sustaining
> Inviolable forms: the fleur-de-lis,
>
> The subtle acanthus, the shell-like dominions
> Of diamond accretions royal on coal,
> The Gothic tower and the rabbit warren,
>
> The fine interchange of matter and matter,
> The natural and social shifting in the bonds
> Of dialogues and elegies that rise from the soil.

Notes from the Castle also contains some fine letter-poems, a genre which might be thought obliquely allied to the elegy, since such poems are addressed to friends still living, but absent. "Stars," for James Merrill, recalls, not only the Ovid of the *Metamorphoses* whom Moss mentions there, but the poet who wrote the *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto* from exile, reflecting on friendship, its basis in a shared past and its ability to survive separation and change.

Richard Hugo's letter-poems appear towards the end of his *Selected Poems*,[8] culled from his book *31 Letters and 13 Dreams*. These letters, written mostly to other poets from various western locations ("Letter to Kizer from Seattle") are wise and moving meditations on friendship, place, displacement and poetry. They are far superior to the dream-poems which accompany them; most dreams, as such, have no natural public content, and I find these recountings unintelligible. The letter-poems, in contrast, are doubly shareable, for by writing his letters as poems the poet has raised intensely personal communication to statements of universal significance. Thus in "Letter to Levertov from Butte":

> On the one hand, no matter what my salary is
> or title, I remain a common laborer, stained by the perpetual
> dust from loading flour or coal . . .
>
> . . . On the other hand,
> I know the cruelty of poverty, the embittering ways

[8] SELECTED POEMS, by *Richard Hugo*. Norton. $12.95.

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love is denied, and food, the trival compensation of each day, . . .

. . . and I don't want

to be part of it.

Up to this point, I have considered poetry in its purely social dimension, as a way in which people talk to other people (ceremoniously, publicly); but I don't wish to neglect another indispensable function of poetry, which is to stir and bring into question our sense of the natural world mutely surrounding us. Hugo, in particular, is primarily a pastoral poet, though in a precarious sense of the term, for the nature he broods over is blasted and disjointed. He writes of mill-towns on the reeking, polluted rivers of the American Northwest, and of the poor (including most of the remaining Indians) who scratch out a living and drink away their weekends there. The power of his vision is undeniable, as here in "Duwamish":

> Midwestern in the heat, this river's
> curves are slow and sick. Water knocks
> at mills and concrete plants, and crud
> compounds the grey. On the out-tide,
> water, half salt water from the sea,
> rambles by a barrel of molded nails,
> gray lumber piles, moss on ovens
> in the brickyards no one owns.

The tribal relation to nature is gone, corrupted or dying in the impoverished Indians themselves. "Indian Graves at Jocko":

> A forlorn lot like this, where snow
> must crawl to find the tribal stones,
> is more than just a grim result of cheat,
> Garfield's forgery, some aimless trek
> of horses from the stolen Bitter Root.
> Dead are buried here because the dead
> will always be obscure, wind
> the one thing whites will always give a chance.

Hugo knows this countryside like the back of his (mechanic-poet-fisherman's) hand, its desolation, its enormity, and he is harshly clear-eyed about the hopelessness of mythical, the viciousness of mechanical, constructions upon it. Reading through his *Selected Poems,* I can see that the poet has worked out a separate peace for himself; yet that leaves unsolved the dilemma of how the human figure is to be integrated into the torn landscape.

What can a poet do? Dave Smith, in *Goshawk, Antelope,*[9] uses the ele-

[9] GOSHAWK, ANTELOPE, by *Dave Smith.* University of Illinois Press. $10.00.

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ments of tribal unification, but ironically, admitting that they have been disenchanted. In particular, he takes over the totem, that figure which compounds the subhuman, the human, and the divine. In the title poem, he maintains a delicate balance between a playful and serious use of totemic imagery by emphasizing the tension between the polar terms of his metaphors, and the work of imagination in devising them. The goshawk and antelope, male and female principles, both are Smith's father and mother and are not: for how could such alien creatures be kin? The goshawk, for instance, is first presented as entirely Other, in a setting which is at once actual and a landscape of memory, the intense sunlight, long hours of driving, and some past trouble inducing Smith's double vision:

> he
> fell across my windshield, a dot at sixty, and I, half-
>
> looking for a place I had never seen, half-dreaming rooms
> where blind miles of light lie on framed family faces,
>
> saw him before he was anything, a spot above the glassy road
> and in my eye, acetylene burned by brightness and hours
> of passage.

Memory and present vision move closer and closer as the poem progresses, until at the end they are wholly superimposed:

> the accusing goshawk face of my father in that dark room
> where I walked too late, where the glowing fur-tufts
> of candle shadows drift on her face and his
>
> and what was held has become, suddenly, lost like breath.

We can accept the totemic identification because it has been prepared so carefully in the poem. The wilderness converges on the poet; the poet's mind is also a wilderness where all his history converges on one moment, in which the totem names, if it does not dissolve, the mystery which drives the poem to its conclusion.

Again and again, Smith holds up the human to the nonhuman world, complicating the mirror-images with an ineluctable sense of alienation. On what basis, then, is the sympathetic correspondence asserted—between the woman and the apple tree, lovers and seals, the young boy and the "Hawktree," the pregnant wife and the spider she will not kill? Each poem has its own solution, and the reader must keep going back to them. My only reservation about Smith's poetry is its obscurity, which must partly be due to the enormous difficulty of the themes he has chosen to address, and his refusal to treat them in any simple fashion; still, a poet's failure to communicate is no better than silence.

Twelve Moons[10] by Mary Oliver, is another book whose subject is nature

[10] TWELVE MOONS, by *Mary Oliver.* Little, Brown and Company. $7.95.

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and the place of a human creature in it. When Oliver holds to her sense of respectful distance, the poems succeed very well; only when that hold slips do they become too anthropomorphic and sentimental, too much like animal fables. The poet lives in Provincetown and clearly spends a great deal of time outdoors, as one imagines Annie Dillard, covering miles of fields and woods, then halting, motionless, attentive, for hours, "Entering the Kingdom":

> The dream of my life
> Is to lie down by a slow river
> And stare at the light in the trees—
> To learn something by being nothing
> A little while but the rich
> Lens of attention.
>
> But the crows puff their feathers and cry
> Between me and the sun,
> And I should go now.
> They know me for what I am.
> No dreamer,
> No eater of leaves.

The figure of the crows here tells the ambiguity of her position, for they are at once mythologized (as the angel at the gates of Eden) and yet, having been given a voice, they contradict their own speech, telling her how strange she is within the kingdom, how little entitled to her attributions of discourse. Like the paradox of the liar, the poem swings back and forth, riddling.

You could almost use this book as a field guide (and it is entirely à propos to recall here Robert Hass's beautiful *Field Guide*): surely one function of a poet/naturalist is to tell the reader to go out and look. When we go out just to look we are admittedly tourists, but this guide sometimes self-consciously tries to compensate for the way in which names divide and dismember the wild, and offers as well acute observation:

> Tossed under the tree
> The cracked bones
>
> Of the owl's most recent feast
> Lean like shipwreck, starting
>
> The long fall back to the center—
> The seepage, the flowing,
>
> The equity: sooner or later
> In the shimmering leaves
>
> The rat will learn to fly, the owl
> Will be devoured.

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So oddly inverted is the sense of this last couplet, it reminds us that nature's equity is none of ours, even while we cannot help but suspect some delicate balance.

The sense of contingency which I have argued a contemporary poet must cultivate in coming to terms with nature, inevitably also gives rise to some awareness of our peculiar historicity. On the one hand, the poet writes out of tradition past (including our present curious custom of pretending we don't have one), and on the other hand, none of the traditional solutions will serve, for the problematic, whatever it is, has already been superseded.

Donald Justice's *Selected Poems*[11] play variations on the themes of time's passage, mortality, afternoon and autumn. His writing never succumbs to the black despair which corroded the poetry of Weldon Kees (whom he served so well as editor), but is held by a kind of mental equipoise and illusionless wit. It is grave, measured, detached, never cold but breathtakingly formal. I would say that any young American poet must come to Donald Justice's work sooner or later to learn the state of the art, even though he characteristically protests to his students:

> No more!
> There has been traffic enough
> In the bedroom of the muse.

A few examples must suffice here to exhibit his concerns and the perfection of his severely self-selected oeuvre. Often he writes of neighborhoods, quiet with the stillness of desolation, anonymous and American: though one senses behind them Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens,* the same charitable attention to the old, the lost, the trapped and dying. For example, "Bus Stop":

> And the last bus
> Comes letting dark
> Umbrellas out—
> Black flowers, black flowers.
>
> And lives go on.
> And lives go on
> Like sudden lights
> At street corners
>
> Or like the lights
> In quiet rooms
> Left on for hours
> Burning, burning.

Here is real chastity of diction, a reproach to our tribe's nervous, adulter-

[11] SELECTED POEMS, by *Donald Justice.* Atheneum. $10.95.

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ated language. "A Winter Ode to the Old Men of Lummus Park, Miami, Florida," recalling Baudelaire's *"Les Petites Vieilles,"* concludes:

> Poor cracked thermometers stuck now
> At zero everlastingly,
> Old men, bent like your walking sticks
> As with the pressure of some hand,
> Surely we must have thought you strong
> To lean on you so hard, so long!

Dante, Milton, Baudelaire, Rilke, Alberti, Guillevic, haunt the pages of this collection, a recurrence not at all inconsistent with the fact that Justice's landscapes and characters are thoroughly American, and that he rarely treats Europe itself directly. The tacit presence of European culture is what gives substance and resonance to his reflective preoccupation with the past.

Anthony Hecht, in *The Venetian Vespers,*[12] dwells on the European connection explicitly. The title poem, a very long narrative, concerns an American who, hounded by a silent crime which wrecked his childhood *a posteriori,* has come to Venice for refuge and oblivion.

Hecht's deployment of the English language can only be described as gorgeous. No chastity here, but sensual and overripe language, as in this description of St. Mark's:

> Gradually
> Glories reveal themselves, grave mysteries
> Of the faith cast off their shadows, assume their forms
> Against a heaven of coined and sequined light,
> A splatter of gilt cobblestones, flung grains
> Or crumbs of brilliance, the vast open fields
> Of the sky turned intimate and friendly.

What this glorious mausoleum will bestow, so the protagonist hopes, is "a moment of unwonted grace" where he can forget himself, and the torment of past and future. Where else but in Venice, where the present is a past gilded, gelded and transfixed by tourist money, isolated from the mainland and slowly sinking? Even the weather invites a trance-like forgetfulness:

> Blown shawls of rain
> Quiver and luff, veil the cathedral front
> In flailing laces where the street lamps hold
> Fixed globes of sparkled haze high in the air
> And the black pavement runs with wrinkled gold
> In pools and wet dispersions . . .

[12] THE VENETIAN VESPERS, by *Anthony Hecht.* Atheneum. $10.00.

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The obsessive vision of the American, and Venice itself, provide Hecht with the occasion he needs for a virtuoso display of verbal brilliance.

The moral of the tale seems to be that the American promise of opportunity and self-determination was simply a lie; the ancient doom was in full force all along, so that returning to Europe in order to lie down before it is entirely appropriate. If this is not an anachronistic view of things, it is at least a retreat from the complexity of modern vision. Indeed vision, in the book as a whole, takes the form of one ultimate hypnotic moment where the self is lost in looking. The chambermaid in "The Grapes," the wife in "The Short End," and the American dying in Venice all implode as they stare at a vortex of color: a bowl of grapes in water, a carriage lantern, a sunset, which have become prisms to collect and focus light for one final, terrible conflagration.

I have difficulty with the poetry of both Justice and Hecht because of their unrelenting world-weariness. The same old-world resignation flaws the poetry of George Seferis, whereas in the work of that other monumental figure of contemporary Greek letters, Odysseus Elytis, it is transcended. Kimon Friar's selection and translation of Elytis' poetry is provided with an extensive and detailed introduction, notes and bibliography, which serve well as a guide through the living pillars of Elytis' forest of symbols. One might quarrel here and there with Friar's selection, and regret, for example, that the engaging, modern, cloud-headed *Maria Nepheli* appeared too late to be included, but in general the book is quite representative.

The naively ecstatic, sensual poetry of Elytis' youth (*Orientations, In the Service of Summer, Sun the First*) darkens in the poet's maturity with a recognition of man's tragic condition and the dislocation of modernity. *The Lost Second Lieutenant* and *Axion Esti* are marked by Elytis' experience of the invasion of Greece by Italy and Germany during World War II, and the subsequent civil war. *Six and One Remorses for the Sun* marks a transition, and with *The Light Tree* (1971) Elytis is free both of naive mythology and of a despair like Seferis', that the future can never pull itself from the entrails of the past.

In *The Light Tree,* a response to the "problem of nature" develops which is neither a resolution nor a dissolution, but a celebration: a fleeting plunge into the sea/the sun, intimating a mysterious unity which cannot be held nor captured with words. It must be undertaken again and again, for whatever glimpse is possible in our age of reflection is permanently precarious. (Try to fix the vision as a tribal grid of gods and demons, and reflection will instantly disband it; try to hide it behind the screen of science, and enigmatic nature (laughing wordlessly) will push through with her little green leaves.) In a deliberately open and fluid syntax, Elytis writes "Three Times the Truth":

> I lived on nothing Only words could not suffice me As a wind passed by and my ears unraveled an unworldly sound fhiá fhioú

[13] THE SOVEREIGN SUN, by *Odysseus Elytis.* Translated by *Kimon Friar.* Temple University Press. np.

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fhioú I imagined a thousand things What fistfulls of beach-stones What basketfuls of fresh honeybees and bulging waterjars where the vvvvv of the captive air could be heard thundering.

Some thing Some thing Something daemonic but which can be caught in the shape of an Archangel as in a net I babbled and ran on I arrived and from out of language imprinted waves on my hearing.

Elytis' Archangel is sometimes dressed in the Greek landscape, sometimes in the flesh of a young girl, for his plunge into the "altus" is also the act of love, an embodied gymnastic-metaphysic of light which, like love, is always in need of reenactment. For example, "The Girl the North Wind Brought":

Kindled orbs of light burst behind her and left in the sky something like the elusive signs of Paradise

I was in time to see for a moment the forks between her legs grow wide and all of the place inside with even the little saliva of the sea Afterwards her odor reached me like fresh bread and wild mountain licorice

My only quarrel with this book is that the translations appear without the original Greek. No book intended to introduce a major poet to a wider audience should fail to include the original poems! Readers seriously interested in Elytis might want to order a selection of his writings in Greek, *'Ekloghí 1935–1977*, produced last year by the Greek publishing house AKMΩN, which to a certain extent overlaps with Friar's selection.

The emblem of Elytis' poetry might be an Ionian *kore*, smiling, seductive, painted, her hair and chiton wavy as the surface of the sea. Angelos Sikelianos (1884–1951), on the other hand, wrote a severer poetry which can only be described as Doric, reminding one of the western pediment of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia, where Apollo stretches his arm calmly above the poised battle between the Lapiths and the Centaurs. Indeed, Elytis is a poet of the islands and the Aegean, Sikelianos of the mainland: Sparta, Corinth, Eleusis, Olympia.

Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard have put together a limited but attractive sample of Sikelianos' poetry in translation, flanked by the original Greek, a brief but illuminating introduction, notes, and schematic chronology.[14] Sikelianos' hierophantic poetry, like that of the young Hölderlin, borders on the false-archaic, and only when it is tempered by a disillusionment late in coming (during the years preparatory to the second World War) does it reveal a more modern sensibility. His most priestly poetry strikes one with its barbarity, though perhaps he was playing deliberately on the darker chords of traditional culture. In "The Vil-

[14] SELECTED POEMS, by *Angelos Sikelianos*. Translated by *Edmund Keeley* and *Philip Sherrard*. Princeton University Press. $12.50.

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lage Wedding," for instance, the mother of the bride admonishes the bridegroom:

> And, bridegroom, there where her throat is ringed
> like the dove's or the pigeon's,
> there alone let the mark be cut
> for her head to be severed from her body
> should the day of unfaithfulness dawn—
> and before that day lay no harsh hand on her.

What mitigates the ungentle ritualism in Sikelianos' poetry even from the very beginning is his precise and sensual rendering of the Greek landscape. In "The First Rain," two lovers look together from a window to see:

> Sulphur-pale, the clouds
> darkened the fields, the vines;
> wind moaned in the trees
> with a secret turbulence,
> and the quick swallow went
> breasting over the grass.

Scents "from balsam, pine, acanthus,/ from osier, or thyme" are carefully transformed by the poet into the scent of eros, and the rainstorm, when it falls, into sexual love.

In Sikelianos' later poetry, however, he introduces myth only in analogy to episodes or revelations of his own experience, so that we no longer have to assimilate it directly but instead through the filter of the poet's worldly (or, more accurately, earthly) wisdom. His reworking of the Daedelus myth, for instance, is profound indeed:

> But if a man who from his earliest years
> has said that the heavens and the earth are one,
> that his own thought is the world's hearth and center,
> and that the earth may mingle with the stars
> as a field's subsoil with its topsoil, so that the heavens too
> may bring forth wheat

such a man will "gird his wings like armor, and climb among the winds." Daedelus' flight is the ascension of thought; he unites heaven and earth because he is brave enough to launch himself between them, animating even the sleepy statues of mankind by reminding them of their mortality.

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SAMUEL HAZO

Aristides Is Alive and Well and Living in Chicago

WITH ALL GOOD WRITING, the joy is in the reading, not the having read. Which means that nostalgia can never eclipse what is created in the reader by words as he reads (or re-reads) them. One of the few literary forms where the reader is "you" to the writer and not some variant of the third person is the essay (the others being the letter, the address, the curse and some lyrical poems). Even in its present demise, the essay still offers more unique opportunities for wit, irony, puns and incisiveness than anything else I can name. I speak here of the familiar essay and not the usual literary essay with its footnotes and gas; the sociological essay, which makes up in breadth what it lacks in depth; the op.ed. essay, which suffers invariably from being shaped to a pre-determined word-count (James Reston's thoughts, as he once admitted, seem to come in three-hundred-word sizes); or what appears on the by-line pages of *Time* and *Newsweek*, where the slogan could easily be ". . . if you can't be profound, be slick." But in the hands of a writer who knows how to be enjoyably familiar (who, linguistically, sees the reader as "tu" rather than as "vous" or "usted"), the result is often the best kind of prose that can be written. As proof I cite Lamb on the children he never had, Hazlitt on death, Camus on the beauty of Helen or the future of tragedy, De Rougemont on St.-Exupéry, St.-Exupéry on men or machines or freedom or France, E. B. White on New York, Octavio Paz on safety and nausea and John Leonard on almost anything when the spirit is in him. To this group I can now enthusiastically add the name of Joseph Epstein.

Epstein's *Familiar Territory*[1] (familiar being the style of his writing, and territory being the U.S.A. in the present and preceding tenses) is a vintage anthology of fourteen essays that he wrote under the pseudonym of Aristides for *The American Scholar*. (Epstein is the present editor and has treated the journal to its own ecumenical housecleaning, but that is another story.) What are Epstein's subjects? Well, take your pick—forms of address in correspondence, the fate of a "language crank," a tour of Americana à la de Tocqueville, urban renewal, humor, bookishness, the state of publishing, how-to-do-it-ism, dreamdom and clothes, sex and decorum, joggers, smokers, television with a small "t," dining, diet and the Sunday blues. Quite a cornucopia.

Books of essays, like commonplace books, picaresque novels, Gideon Bibles or notebooks, are "dippable," which means that a reader can dip in anywhere and start reading. With Epstein I began traditionally with the first essay before gerrymandering the remaining essays and squeezing in

[1] FAMILIAR TERRITORY, Observations on American Life, by *Joseph Epstein*. Oxford University Press. $11.95.

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his preface somewhere in the middle (Rule: read prefaces late since they were invariably written late). In his preface Epstein expatiates briefly on the necessity of the essayist's having a "point of view," which, of course, is not the same as a bias, an overview (whatever that is) or, as Epstein says, an opinion. It is more closely related to perspective, but it is perspective with style. And this is what distinguishes the essayist from the journalist and his obligatory "W's"; the essayist is concerned with the *why* of things, and how he explores that *why* results in his style. Example: Roland Barthes's serpenting insistence that *On the Waterfront* is ultimately a tribute to capitalism since the climax is synonymous with Terry Malloy's return to work.

So much for literary theory, except to note that how Epstein deals with the *why* of his subjects results in a prose that is witty, properly iconoclastic and, as with good bread, filling but light. Take this sentence from "Foodstuff and Nonsense" as a case in point: " . . . Virginia was noted for a dish called 'preserve of fowle,' a Chinese box of culinary creation that consisted of a dove inserted into a partridge, the partridge into a guinea hen, the guinea hen into a duck, the duck into a capon, the capon into a goose, and the goose into a peacock or turkey, and the entire extravaganza cut for serving into transverse sections." The deliciousness of this menu is buttressed by the deliciousness of Epstein's telescoping of one imagistic phrase into another—no small feat in itself. And in any essay where Epstein writes that "Food is the sex of the middle-aged," such prose testifies to the strength of his ingenuity as well as to his attentiveness. The same attentiveness holds true later in the essay when he eulogizes A. J. Liebling, dead at fifty-nine because his appetite for exquisite food exceeded even the usual prudences. For Epstein the problem posed by Liebling's sybaritism (and the death it probably caused) was not as much appetitive as it was philosophical. "More important," he writes, "his [Liebling's] life puts the question whether it is better to live less long but as well as possible, or as long as possible but less well." The human predicament, phrased as telegrammically as that.

If memorability is one of the marks of style, Epstein's mintage of phrases and sentences qualifies. I do not mean that the reader consciously tries to remember a good line here or there; I mean that Epstein writes lines that cannot be forgotten—a litmus test I apply regularly to good writing. In "Sinning in Black and White" he takes on television in general and in particular. In general it is for Epstein a "marketing device" and "a visual Muzak." In particular it is Walter Cronkite ("an instance of absolute fluency in the service of complete mindlessness"), Fred Silverman ("a *schlockmeister* who plays the rating game with the usual winning combination of sex, sniggering humor, violence and nostalgia") and the television celebrity who is "well known for being well known"—ultimately the empty hero of Kozinski's *Being There* who is really not there at all but *is there* because television made and continues to make him happen.

With a subject that brings out the matador in him, Epstein is all flourish and finesse. The essay called "Jokes and Their Relation to the Conscious," notwithstanding an acknowledged indebtedness to Freud, is caviar, and like caviar it should be savored slowly. Why? Because it is one of

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the few essays I have ever read on humor that is itself humorous. And if you think that's a negligible asset, then the burden is on you to name another. Conversely, when Epstein's subject is itself almost beyond resuscitation, not all of Epstein's considerable skills can make it dance. In "Observing the Sabbath" Epstein's thesis is that American Sundays are dull. So be it. Halfway through the essay he's made the point in six or seven flavors. After that one has the clear hope, as Epstein himself suggests at last, that the Lord's day would be better served if the Lord took it back.

It is not uncharacteristic that Epstein makes some of his most telling comments about metaphysical American territory in "Incidental Meditations." The subject is hardly incidental—the pervasiveness of modern psychology in our lives. Epstein demonstrates how we are constantly baited by promotional literature that promises "greater self-knowledge, awareness, growth, fulfillment." He adds that the commitment of numerous Americans to public causes, for instance, is prompted as much by a desire for therapeutic catharsis as by conviction. Epstein's distrust of Freud in this connection (though he admires much of what Freud has to say) and his equal distrust of behavioristic psychology is due to their joint denigration of "will and imagination." The result? A population of victims. Each victim hungers for psychological salvation, but no victim accepts his personal responsibility to save and create himself. The person is thus sacrificed to the psychological self since it is primarily the "self" that psychiatry can treat. It takes no psychologist to see that the egocentrism that is the motive for this therapeutic search for release is nothing but its own disease. It has reversed the spiritual truth that one finds one's life by losing it. Instead one is urged to seek one's life in order not to lose it, which means that "life" is never found but always sought, which in turn means that self-preoccupation and self-indulgence become predictably obsessive. Epstein understands that the "discontent industry" in America thrives on such obsessiveness and does everything to encourage its growth.

In "Dandies Askew," an essay dealing succinctly with clothes and the man, Epstein has a field day with "male narcissism." A writer with a real historical sense, he takes up where Carlyle in *Sartor Resartus* left off and subsequently even uses an awareness of clothes (this seems to me to be a first) as a tool of literary criticism. He notes, for instance, that authors like O'Hara, Fitzgerald, Mary McCarthy, Bellow and even Dickens were or are as attentive to their characters' wardrobes as to their motivations. Finally, what will remain with me from this essay is Epstein's central statement that fashion is "not always synonymous with style" coupled with Gabrielle Chanel's "fashion is made to become unfashionable." Between these parentheses lies the thready terrain of every man's land, and "Brummel - D'Orsay - Baudelaire - Disraeli - Montesquieu - Beerbohm-Epstein" is as good an explorer and curmudgeon as the territory has ever had.

To continue an essay-by-essay appraisal of this book is to risk paraphrasing the unparaphrasable. There's scarcely a page that does not offer à la Coleridge some nugget marked for memory—"New words come in, old words go out, and in the verbal traffic of the United States it is always rush hour"—"His [a magazine publisher's] skill is that of window dress-

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ing, of putting the best possible face on the lowest possible interests"—"A personal library often represents a man's character or, if it consists largely of unread books, his aspirations"—"In the sexual revolution, the dictatorship of the proletariat is established, with only a single qualification—it has proletarianized us all"—"André Malraux, Humphrey Bogart, Franklin Delano Roosevelt—could be said to have worn cigarettes."

Finally, I must confess to a bias. With minor exceptions, I simply find that I agree with Epstein's point of view on the subjects he has chosen for inclusion in the culling. And I take him quite seriously because he takes his subjects, and not himself, seriously. I think, as he does, that publishing today is largely a matter of book production and not pub-lish-ing as Maxwell Perkins would have understood it. Consequently, when I read this passage from Epstein's "Marboro Country"—"At present, I should say . . . publishing is neither a business nor an occupation for gentlemen. Today, by and large, a publishing house comes closer to being a combination of stock brokerage and an advertising agency, but it is suffused with an aura of romance and craziness that makes it less competent than either"—I find it difficult to do anything more than nod in silent agreement. And the same mood of silent agreement characterizes my reaction to the rest of the book. Even among his choices of favorite writers listed in "The Opinionated Librarian" I find so many old friends (Liebling, Conrad, Orwell, Benjamin, Mencken, Bowra, Jarrell, Alain, de Tocqueville) that it could be my library he is describing.

An end, therefore. There is such a thing as too much homage. In his *Autobiography* Mark Van Doren wrote that friends need not like everything equally but they must have "the same heroes and think the same men fools." On this basis I think that Epstein and I qualify as friends, at least for the working day. Our motto might very well be a sentence from his essay on humor: "*Après nous, le déluge,* one thinks, when the generations behind one think *Après le déluge, nous.*" Even between deluges in a world where heroism and foolishness are sometimes mistaken for one another and where salvation often lies in seeing the humor in both, this motto promises solidarity enough.

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JAMES FINN COTTER

Gnostic Visions and Revisions

WHERE DANTE ENDED his long, circuitous journey, the Gnostics begin: with the vision of the human *effige* of Jesus in the beatific light of God. The historic figure of the Nazarene held little importance to them; the risen Lord, who spent years and not a mere forty days with his followers, illumines the pages of their gospels, acts, apocalypses, and treatises. If the disparate writings unearthed at Nag Hammadi have any unity at all, it is this longing for instant illumination without an arduous ascent from below, through the landscape of tortured flesh and up the mountain of reform. Gnostics are in heaven already, risen with Christ from the dead.

"Speaking new things, still speaking about what is in the heart of the Father," *The Gospel of Truth* tells us,[1] Jesus "brought forth the flawless word. Light spoke through his mouth, and his voice gave birth to life. He gave them thought and understanding and mercy and salvation and the powerful spirit from the infiniteness and the gentleness of the Father." Jesus did not bring pain and punishment into the world: he took them on himself and transfigured them: "He became a way for those who were lost and knowledge for those who were ignorant, a discovery for those who were searching, and a support for those who were wavering, immaculateness for those who were defiled." *Gnosis* is this new mind and character, freed from everydayness and doubt, confident in its own elected worth, and perfect in its possession of the truth. Gnostics are themselves the truth and not wanting in anything.

The Gospel of Truth, sometimes attributed to Valentinus, a founder of Gnosticism, is a work of genius that surpasses everything else in the Nag Hammadi collection; it is a prose-poem rather than a tract, a serene meditation of spellbinding beauty. It pictures the cosmos as a pleroma pierced and permeated by the infinite gentleness of the Father's Son, the Word speaking in silent grace to the listening mind. He utters himself, his own secret, divine name, to those who are called to hear it. God is taught by word of mouth: there is no vision without a voice.

Every syllable counts:

> This is the knowledge of the living book which he revealed to the aeons to the last of its [letters], revealing how they are not vowels nor are they consonants, so that one might read them and think of something foolish, but they are letters of the truth which they alone speak who know them. Each letter is a complete ⟨thought⟩ like a complete book, since they are letters written by the Unity, the Father having written them

[1] THE NAG HAMMADI LIBRARY, edited by *James M. Robinson.* Harper & Row. $16.95.

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> for the aeons in order that by means of his letters they should know the Father.[2]

Mysterious passages illustrate the gnostic practice of prayer, as for example in *The Discourse of the Eighth and Ninth*:

> O grace! After these things I give thanks by singing a hymn to thee. For I have received life from thee when thou madest me wise. I praise thee. I call thy name that is hidden within me: a ō ee ō ēēē ōōō iii ōōōō ooooo ōōōōō uuuuuu ōōōōōōōōōōōōōōōōōōōōō. Thou art the one who exists with the spirit. I sing a hymn to thee reverently.

Beginning with Alpha and lengthening on to Omega, the pleroma is sounded through the breath of ceaseless prayer. In the Apocryphal Gospels the child Jesus, questioned about his knowledge of the alphabet, confounds his teachers by expounding the hidden meaning of each letter. Such exercises may have been common among early Christians and not confined to the Gnostics. The symbols of Alpha-Omega, identified with Christ in the Apocalypse, appear often enough in art and literature to indicate they had an aural as well as visual meaning.

The value of visual images is eloquently set out in the *Gospel of Philip*:

> Truth did not come into the world naked, but it came in types and images. One will not receive truth in any other way. There is a rebirth and an image of rebirth. It is certainly necessary that they should be born again through the image. What is the resurrection? The image must rise again through the image.

The image is not abstract, but sacramental: "The Lord [did] everything in a mystery, a baptism and a chrism and a eucharist and a redemption and a bridal chamber." Later Valentinian writers may lose themselves in esoteric theories of creation and in vast emanations, but in these gospels an original inspiration still shines through, not yet made insipid by speculation.

The *Nag Hammadi Library* contains a potpourri of writings that are translations from Greek into Coptic by scribes who at times had a poor grasp of what they were recording. Some materials are not Christian at all (Plato, for example, and Zostrianos), others are not Gnostic. Egyptian monks—perhaps from the nearby monastery of St. Pachomius—would have found plenty of private lore to ruminate and discuss. *The Teaching of Silvanus,* for instance, contains some straightforward, ascetic, non-Gnostic advice about following reason and faith. Some of its observations have a homey flavor: "Live in Christ, and you will acquire a treasure in heaven. Do not become a sausage (made) of many things which are useless, and do not become a guide on behalf of your blind ignorance." God is not

[2] In this edition, the following textural signs are used: square brackets indicate a lacuna which, if possible, has been reconstructed; pointed brackets indicate a correction of an omission or error; and parentheses indicate material supplied by the editor or translator.

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contained by any mental image but is known only through Christ, the lamp and door of the soul.

Many Gnostic texts show little regard for society or the mass of humanity. Sexual relations, the physical world, and personal self-sacrifice are mere illusions at best, perverse deceptions at worst. Jesus only appeared to suffer and die: really he was laughing off-stage at the farce of his crucifixion. Slapstick governs reality, past and present. Old Testament figures become laughingstock characters manipulated by a phantom Jehovah. Gnosticism seems strongly anti-Semitic in its disdain for Jewish history and elitist in its contempt for ordinary Christians. This darker side isolated the Gnostics from the main current of religious and philosophical development in the West and contributed to their disappearance as a sect. Gnosticism lost touch with its own impeccable instructions:

> Blessed is the one who on no occasion caused a soul distress. That person is Jesus Christ. He came to the whole place and did not burden anyone. Therefore, blessed is the one who is like this, because he is a perfect man. This indeed is the Word. Tell us about it, since it is difficult to define. How shall we be able to accomplish such a great thing? How will he give everyone comfort? Above all, it is not proper to cause anyone distress—whether the person is great or small, unbeliever or believer—and then give comfort only to those who take satisfaction in good deeds.
>
> —*The Gospel of Philip*

Orthodox Christians like Clement of Alexandria had no trouble assimilating many Gnostic ideals, and the mystical, charismatic tradition survives in the institutional churches to this day. The lines between orthodoxy and Gnosticism were not always clearly drawn and they stretched out over several centuries in different parts of the Roman world. The term "Gnosticism" itself has been applied to various peoples and beliefs, many of them at the time known only by the names of their founders. In her single-minded study of this period, Elaine Pagels has little patience for the complexity and richness of the two traditions.[3] Instead, she concentrates on old conflicts as though they were present-day controversies, with the result that issues, not illumination, become her concern, as she argues on each page some question that supposedly separated the orthodox from the Gnostics. She strains for evidence, inventing it when necessary, in her attack on Christian Fundamentalism which (Lord knows) deserves debate in a proper forum. But a nineteenth-century American Protestant movement or modern Vatican authoritarianism cannot be laid so easily at the door of the early church. Not without some anachronistic revisions of the sources.

Many Gnostic texts can be made to mean almost anything. The contradictions of thought, loose sentences, vague vocabulary, and ambiguous pronouns call for scholarly caution and precision. The problems are com-

[3] THE GNOSTIC GOSPELS, by *Elaine Pagels.* Random House. $10.00.

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pounded by the lacunae, the emendations and reconstructions often required and sometimes impossible to supply. Pagels nowhere informs her readers about the significance of the textual signs employed by the editors of the *Nag Hammadi Library*. The most famous citation from her work is a case in point. She twice quotes the *Gospel of Philip*:

> . . . the companion of the [Savior is] Mary Magdalene, [But Christ loved] her more than [all] the disciples, and used to kiss her [often] on her [mouth]. The rest of [the disciples were offended] . . .

Although she fails to note it, the phrase "and used to" should also be bracketed since it marks another lacuna in the manuscript. Notice that about half of this passage has had to be reconstructed. In publicizing the book, the publisher has blithely ignored such fine shadings of the truth.

Besides her careless treatment of textual apparatus, Pagels lifts quotations out of context, conflates passages pages apart, changes translations to suit her interpretations, omits opposing data, and draws numerous unwarranted conclusions. In her effort to prove that Gnostics considered God a Mother, for example, she cites *The Apocryphon of John* to show that the third "Person" of the Trinity was thought of as feminine. Her version reads:

> . . . (She is) . . . the image of the invisible, virginal, perfect spirit . . . She became the Mother of everything, for she existed before them all, the mother-father [*matropater*] . . .

How does the original read?

> This is the first [power which was] before all of them (and) [which came] forth from his mind, that [is the Pronoia of the All]. Her light [is the likeness of the] light, the [perfect] power which is [the] image of the invisible, virginal Spirit who is perfect. [The first power], the glory, Barbelo, the perfect glory in the aeons, the glory of the revelation, she glorified the virginal Spirit and praised him, because thanks to him she had come forth. This is the first thought, his image; she became the womb of everything for she is prior to them all, the Mother-Father, the first Man, the holy Spirit, the thrice-male, the thrice-named androgynous one, and the eternal aeon among the invisible ones, and the first to come forth.

The "she" in this paragraph is not the Holy Spirit, who is here masculine, but Barbelo, an aeonian emanation that couples with the Spirit and becomes one with him. For her next piece of evidence, Pagels states that, in the *Gospel of Thomas,* "Jesus contrasts his earthly parents, Mary and Joseph, with his divine Father—the Father of Truth—and his divine Mother, the Holy Spirit." She quotes the verse, "my (earthly) mother [gave me death], but [my] true [Mother] gave me life." Most of the line has been reconstructed and made to fit the procrustean bed. Finally, Pa-

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gels clinches her argument with this flourish: "So, according to the *Gospel of Philip,* whoever becomes a Christian gains 'both father and mother' for the Spirit (*ruah*) is 'Mother of many.' " The original yields the opposite meaning: "When we were Hebrews we were orphans and had only our mother, but when we became Christians we had both father and mother." No mention of "the Spirit," nor does the phrase "Mother of many" occur in the *Gospel of Philip.*

While there are grounds for the Gnostic belief in a feminine deity, the Nag Hammadi writings mostly reflect a negative view of women. In her backtracking fashion, Pagels admits as much after vainly trying to prove their enlightened attitude. She ignores the view of creation given in *The Tripartite Tractate* which pictures the Logos, in a fit of self-doubt, creating an imperfect world: "he became weak like a female nature which has abandoned its virility." Later, he overcame "the illness which is femaleness," and redeemed the universe. Such thinking lurks behind the final saying in the *Gospel of Thomas*: "For every woman who will make herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven." Pagels at first identifies this verse as an example of orthodox prejudice and then attempts to explain it symbolically.

In the *Gospel of Philip* according to Pagels, the author attacks the belief in the virgin birth. She quotes the text: "Adam came into being from two virgins, from the Spirit and from the virgin earth. Christ, therefore, was born from a virgin," but she adds parenthetically "(that is, from the Spirit)." What happened to Mary's virginity and what justifies Pagels' explication? The context supports a belief in the virgin birth, it does not explain it away. Pagels then jumps back to the beginning of the *Gospel* where, she says, "the author ridicules those literal-minded Christians who mistakenly refer the virgin birth to Mary, Jesus' mother, as though she conceived apart from Joseph." She quotes: " 'They do not know what they are saying. When did a woman ever conceive by a woman?' " She fails to cite the next sentence: "Mary is the virgin whom no power defiled." The virgin birth is not in question here, rather the author denies any human birth to Jesus. The only other treatment of the virgin birth in the Library, in *The Testimony of Truth,* asserts that Mary remained a virgin during and after the Savior's birth. Pagels disregards this source.

Much of Pagels' material comes not from the Nag Hammadi texts but from the early church fathers. Although she informs us that she has "in certain cases . . . changed the translation for the sake of clarity, consistency or interpretation" in the Library versions, she fails to mention that she does the same with other translations. Since the majority of her quotations are not from the Nag Hammadi collection, one must check the footnotes in the back of her book to know what source is referred to. After opening the chapter on "God the Father/ God the Mother" by stating that "many of these texts" from Nag Hammadi "speak of God as a dyad who embraces both masculine and feminine elements," Pagels then quotes nine examples from Hippolytus and Irenaeus! Half of the "secret texts" that follow are statements by church fathers.

Nor is Pagels fair and accurate in her citations. She declares: "Bishop

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Irenaeus and his followers insisted that there could be only one church, and outside of that church, he declared, 'there is no salvation.' " Is this a direct quote? Her reference reads: "See, for example, Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy,* 111–240 [!]." Later, she tells us herself that Bauer has been criticized "for overlooking evidence that did not fit his theory." She also oversimplifies the orthodox teaching on the resurrection of the body and the primacy of Peter, using the Longer Ending of Mark and Irenaeus' statement on the authority of Rome as if no controversy existed regarding these passages. To assert that Peter's primacy depended on the claim to his being the "first witness of the resurrection" has no foundation and ignores the ambiguity of "first." She treats Clement of Rome as a monarchial bishop when, in the letter she cites, he speaks of bishops and priests as though they were identical. She completely misreads one of his sentences; she alleges: "Carried away with his argument, Clement warns that whoever disobeys the divinely ordained authorities 'receives the death penalty!' " Clement, drawing an analogy between the liturgy of the Old and New covenants, argues that just as those who once broke an observance in the Jewish service would be "punished with death," Christians run a graver peril "since we ourselves have been given so much fuller knowledge."

Without multiplying instances where Pagels shifts the emphasis in an original work, two further extracts must suffice. She writes: "Tertullian expects the idea of Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection to shock his readers; he insists that 'it must be believed, because it is absurd!' " Echoing 1 Corinthians 1:21–23, Tertullian actually states: "And the Son of God died; it is by all means to be believed, because it is absurd." That the Son of God should die is incredible; by inserting the resurrection into the declaration, Pagels hopes to prove a literalness in Tertullian's belief. She applies his words on the reality of Christ's flesh exclusively to the risen body when Tertullian is speaking of the integrity of the body that was born, lived, suffered, died, was buried, and rose again. Tertullian's poetic view of the renewal of all creation and the return of each person physically from death like a blossoming seed, a new dawn, another spring, a phoenix—none of this poetry appears in Pagels' summary. Again, Hippolytus quotes a Gnostic prayer to *Adam*: "From thee (comes) father, and through thee (comes) mother, two names immortal, progenitors of Aeons, denizen of heaven, thou illustrious man." Pagels renders this excerpt as if it were addressed to *God*: " 'From Thee, Father, and through Thee, Mother, the two immortal names, Parents of the divine being, and thou, dweller in heaven, humanity, of the mighty name. . . .' " Quoting Hippolytus on "the Mind of the Universe" which is male and "a great Intelligence" which is female, she omits the qualifying Gnostic notations that the male is "from above" while the female is "from below."

For Pagels, the Gnostics were the creative artists, poets, visionaries, and free-spirits who were suppressed centuries ago by the doctrinaire orthodox who surrendered ecstasy and intellect in blind obedience to authority. How Prudentius, Augustine, Dante, or Teresa of Avila came to be, how Ravenna, Chartres, or Bach's Cantatas burst into existence, her rigid theory cannot explain.

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As a self-proclaimed "scholar" and "historian," Pagels must realize her responsibility to reproduce evidence with objectivity. Her translations are, to put it kindly, improvisations; one notes that, though she was involved in writing several introductions for the Library edition, none of the translations were entrusted to her. Her book is more narrow-minded than anything Irenaeus—the author of the idea of "recapitulation" of all things in Christ—ever penned. One need not worry about the orthodox, however, who like the poor will be with us always. By once again immersing the Gnostics in controversy, she has distorted their positive contributions to Western thought. By failing to let the best of them speak for themselves, she has made sausage of their teaching instead of a lamp to light the place.

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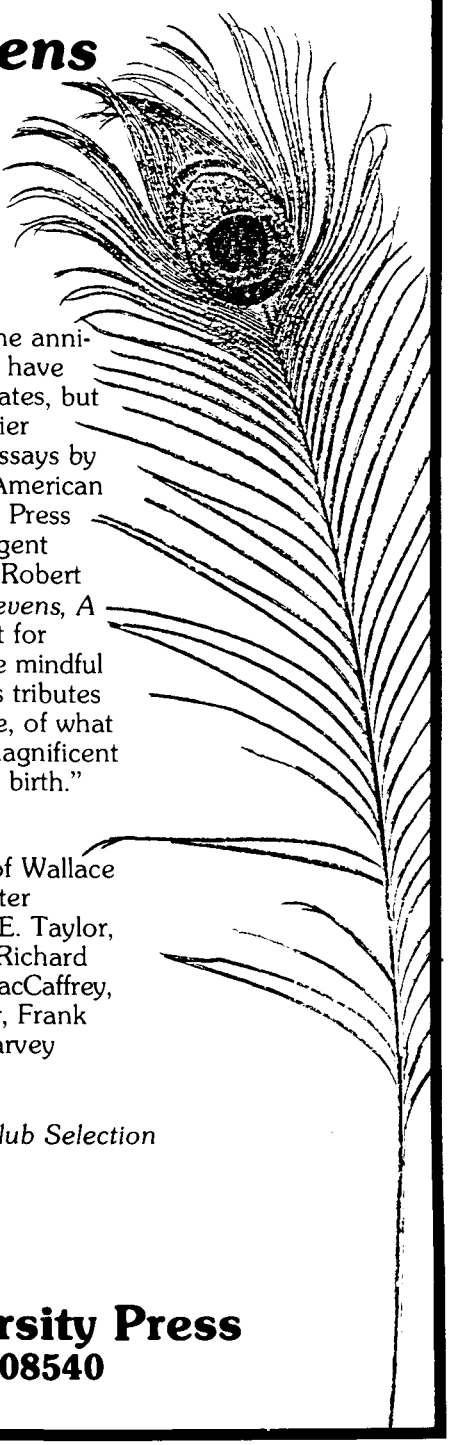
Wallace Stevens

A Celebration

Edited by Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel



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